LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE

PARSHAS VAYEIRA

BY

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LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE
ESSAYS ON PARSHAS VAYEIRA

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Dedicated to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who, more than any Jewish leader, has prepared us for Moshiach and the imminent Redemption

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INTRODUCTION

The following collection of essays on *parshas Vayeira* was taken from the weekly Torah messages that I have been sending to hundreds of individuals over the past 22 years.

These messages were written in the spirit of the talks of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Several of them are actually based on or adaptations of his essays and discourses on the parsha.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe declared that we are living in unique times. He applied the words of the Midrash to our day:

"The time of your Redemption has arrived."

The Rebbe stated further that the straightforward way for us to bring about the actual Redemption is by learning what the Torah says about Moshiach and Redemption. While learning Torah in general has the capacity to change our mindset, learning about Moshiach and Redemption has the capacity to alter of exile-constrained way of thinking and cultivating a liberating manner of thinking.

In this spirit, each one of these messages concludes with an application of the Torah lesson of that week to our understanding of Moshiach and Redemption, as well as to help us prepare for the coming of Moshiach and the imminent Redemption.

It is my fervent hope that these essays will contribute to the process of changing our *galus*/exile mindset into a Moshiach mindset, which is effected by the study of these themes in Torah.. And may this effort contribute to the imminent Redemption through our righteous Moshiach. Amen.

The parsha Vayeira is obviously a fundamental parsha because it contains the Akeidah, the singular act of devotion to G-d that has distinguished the Patriarch Abraham and has stood us in good stead for eternity. It also begins with the appearance of G-d to Abraham, a portent of the future Messianic Age when G-d will be revealed to the entire world.

ESSAY ONE

MAMRE'S ADVICE

Accepting advice from others is virtuous on two counts.

It gives you objective analysis and it also uplifts the advisor and allows him or her to enter into your world.

ESSAY ONE

MAMRE'S ADVICE

Where Credit is Due

G-d appeared to Abraham in the plains of Mamre, we are told at the beginning of this week's parsha. In fact, the entire parsha is so named: "*vayeira*-and he appeared," on account of this special revelation of G-d to Abraham. What was this appearance for? And why does the torah go out of its way to tell us that it occurred in the plains of Mamre?

Rashi, citing earlier sources, explains that Mamre, Abraham's friend, was the man who gave him advice concerning his circumcision. When Abraham finally did circumcise himself, he was visited by G-d. But G-d gives credit where credit is due. Because it was Mamre who got Abraham to circumcise himself, G-d's revelation to Abraham occurred in his territory.

Why did Abraham Need Advice?

There is no need to explain how bizarre it was that Abraham, of all people, after being told by directly

by G-d to fulfill this precious mitzvah, would consult with an "outsider" concerning its observance.

Commentators who have noted this anomaly have come up with various interpretations. Among them is the one given by *Tosphos* that Mamre's advice was sought to resolve the question whether Abraham should do it privately or publicly. Mamre's advice was to do it publicly. Concerning the actual performance of the mitzvah, however, there was never any question.

Rashi does not make this qualification. He states simply that it was Mamre who had given him the advice. There seems to be a more simple and straightforward way of understanding Abraham's consultation with Mamre.

Consult!

Rashi comments on the plural form in the verse "let us make man," and informs us that when G-d created man He consulted with the angels. Obviously, G-d did not need their permission or their advice, but, in His humility, He demonstrated that when a pivotal decision has to be made—such as the decision concerning the very creation of the world—the process should not be imposed on the world, but with its consent.

Abraham followed G-d's initiative. Abraham was about to embark on the single most important venture of his life. He was about to enter into an eternal covenant with G-d. Abraham was about to inaugurate a new age, a new people. By entering into this covenant, Abraham was initiating the process, which led to the selection of the Jewish people at Sinai, and will culminate with the true and complete Redemption. Abraham was mindful of the fact that the ultimate goal of his act of circumcision was to radically change the world.

In changing the world there can be two approaches. One can impose the change, or one can give the world an opportunity to be part of the process of change itself.

In the spirit of the famous "light-bulb" joke: "how many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but it has to want to change..." Abraham wanted the singular event of the bris to represent the will of the world itself to be transformed.

Following G-d's own precedent of consulting with the angels about the creation of man, Abraham consulted with Mamre, a non-Jew, concerning whether he, Abraham, should enter into a covenant which would forever alter the state of nature, by introducing a new dimension of humanity into the

world - the Jewish nation. Mamre's affirmative response to Abraham's question demonstrated that the world was ready for the change and that the change would occur because of the world not in spite of it.

Coronation Day

When we commemorate the creation of the world in our Rosh Hashanah liturgy, we do not play a passive role. We emphasize how we are the ones who coronate G-d as our king.

G-d is not satisfied to simply assert his sovereignty over us. He wants us to accept him, which we do throughout the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah and especially through the shofar.

Before Sinai G-d Consulted with Us!

At Mount Sinai, the Jewish people—our sages inform us—were asked to respond to the commandments, yes or no.

G-d wanted them to accept the commandments, so that He did not have to impose it on them.

Even Bilam, the heathen prophet, upon hearing of the revelation of G-d at Sinai, commented: "G-d was giving His nation strength; He was blessing his

people with peace." Even Bilam the heathen, representing the nations of the world, was agreeable to the Torah—at least for others.

We are Asked to Embrace the Geulah!

We are living in the final stage time when G-d is committed to alter the state of existence, from *gola*h-exile to *Geulah*-redemption, when the entire purpose of creation and Sinai will come to fruition.

This final stage can happen and will happen with or without our participation. Nevertheless, all of Jewish literature speaks of how G-d wants us and the entire world to be part of the process of bringing about this change.

Even the Mamre's of the world—Mamre derives from the word that means rebel—must be made part of the process. While we cannot force anyone to change his or her lifestyle and attitude, we can help create a positive atmosphere by our actions, so that everyone will joyously usher in the age of Redemption

ESSAY TWO

"YES WE KAIN"

There is a dichotomy between what is intended and what is actualized.

G-d's confirmation of His creation is what made the creation capable of fulfilling its mission.

ESSAY TWO

"YES WE KAIN"

Abraham's Hospitality

Abraham had just undergone circumcision at the age of 99. Ailing, he sits at the entrance of his tent to see if there any travelers he could invite into his home and feed. Because of the intense heat, G-d had to send him angels disguised as humans, so that Abraham would not be pained at the prospects of not being able to shower some of his kindness on others.

In the beginning of the parsha, the Torah records the following dialogue between Abraham and his guests:

> "Please, let some water be brought so you can bathe your feet and recline under the tree. I will get some bread for you to satisfy your hearts. Afterwards, you may continue on, for so ["kain"] you have visited your servant. They said, "do so ["kain"] as you have suggested."

Commentators find it difficult to understand how Abraham of all people could suggest to his guests that they came to him just for his food. It is likewise problematic as to why the angels added the word "so" instead of just saying, "do as you have suggested."

Affirmation

In answering these questions it is important to note that the Hebrew word for "so" in Abraham's statement to the angels and in their reply is the word "kain." Kain can be translated as either yes or so, as in "so it is." It is a term used to affirm or confirm something that needs to be affirmed or confirmed.

What needed to be confirmed here? What was so important about this event that it had to be confirmed with the word "kain?"

The Midrash seems to attach great importance to Abraham's words to the angels when it states that Abraham was, in effect, telling them (either consciously or subliminally) that from the day the world was created they were invited or intended to come to Abraham. In other words, something pivotal and cosmic was taking place here; not just an exercise in hospitality.

Indeed, from all of the above it appears that there was a much more important drama taking place than simply Abraham, the ailing Jew, showing his kindness to a group of wayfarers who happened to be angels but were disguised as people. And the key to understanding what this drama was all about is the Hebrew word "kain."

Confirmation of Creation

Where do we find the word "kain" used first?

When G-d creates the world He introduces each creation by the words "Let there be..." Those words are followed by the words "*Vayehi chain*-And it was so." It appears as if the Torah had to confirm that when G-d ordered something to happen, it did indeed do so. Who would have thought otherwise? The Torah should have stated, "G-d said let there be..." and we would have understood that it happened. Or it could have said, "G-d created the..." Why the need for confirmation?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe answers that when G-d created the world, He created it with a plan and purpose. His objective is for the entire world to reflect its Creator's presence. G-d wanted the entire world to become a holy and G-dly world. To accomplish this it would not suffice to just say, "Let

there be vegetation," for example. If that were the case, vegetation would certainly emerge, but would it have the capacity to be expressive of its G-dly source and energy? The answer is that without G-d adding the words, "and it was so," it would not be so. It would not be a world that can feel comfortable with its destiny. There would be an unbridgeable chasm between the world as it was created and the world the way G-d would want it to be.

When the Torah tells us that G-d confirmed that "it was so" it imbued the world with a potential of being transformed into a perfect world; not just a world that exists for the sake of existing.

Hence, the word and concept of "kain" expresses the idea that every process that involves changing the nature of things to conform to a higher purpose must be affirmed and confirmed.

World Waited for Abraham for Validation

Here too, when the angels came to Abraham—ostensibly to heal him, tell him about the birth of his son and the third to destroy Sodom—their real purpose was to allow Abraham to introduce the concept of "kein"—"it is" or "will be so" to the world. The world, at the time of creation, was

waiting of an Abraham to express this novel concept of "kain" it is so!

When Abraham circumcised himself and entered into a new relationship with G-d that was the precursor of what was to happen at Sinai he immediately followed that covenant with a desire to help nurture others. Just as G-d did not rely on His initial statement with which He created the world, but followed it with "kain" to enable the world to actualize its potential, so as to give confirmation to its validity as a G-dly creation, so too Abraham confirmed his covenant with G-d by serving these guests. In doing so, he made the earlier covenant meaningful and enduring.

Abraham could have easily said to himself, "I have just undergone surgery at the age of 99 and I am entitled to take it easy. Why should I feed and serve these idolaters?"

Instead Abraham takes the initiative to sit outside his tent under the blazing sun notwithstanding the incredible heat that prevented every human being from traveling. It wasn't due simply to Abraham's kindness; it was his understanding that when one is inspired, or when one initiates a relationship, it must immediately be followed by some concrete, confirming action. One must not be satisfied with saying, "I am inspired and I will do something good

tomorrow." One must follow one's commitment with an affirming and confirming action.

So when Abraham speaks to his guests he tells them, "for so [kain"] you have visited your servant." He did not mean to suggest that they came with the intention of being fed. Rather he was saying to them that the reason they came was to help him fulfill the "kain" imperative; to translate his good intentions and inspiration that occasioned his circumcision into immediate action.

They, in turn, said, "do so ["kain"] as you have suggested." They, in turn, confirmed that his action was indeed a manifestation of the "kain" imperative; it had struck roots and the process that will inexorably lead to Sinai and the ultimate Messianic Age had begun in earnest.

Translating Intentions into Action

The lesson from the above is obvious. We must be able to translate our good intentions into action. We must learn how to say "Yes, we kain"... We should not be content with good intentions; not even with inspiring initiation rites.

For close to 2,000 years we have been engaged in a process of making the world a better world, a G-dly world. Compared to the world in the future

Messianic Age we are now in the prefatory stage waiting impatiently for G-d to invoke the word He spoke through the prophet Isaiah: "As one who his mother comforts, so ["kain"] will I comfort you; and you shall be comforted in Jerusalem."

We are now ready for G-d to say to us, Yes, I kain!

ESSAY THREE

THE LAUGH OF THE FUTURE

Laughter comes in two forms; for the here and now and for the future.

Laughter for the here in now is human; laughter for the future is Divine.

ESSAY THREE

THE LAUGH OF THE FUTURE

Everyone is Laughing

Yitzchak, or Isaac, is the name given the second of our forefathers. In last week's parsha, G-d tells Abraham that he will father a son, and he should be named Yitzchak. In this week's parsha, where we read about his miraculous birth—Abraham was a hundred years old and Sarah was ninety!—the Torah seems to give the reason for the choice of the name Yitzchak which translates as "he will laugh." After mentioning that Abraham named him Yitzchak, the Torah relates that Sarah exclaimed: "G-d has made me happy. Whoever hears will be happy with me." It seems that his name is related to the idea of laughter and joy.

It seems that everything about Yitzchak's birth revolved around laughter. Abraham laughed when G-d told him he would father a child. Sarah laughed when the angel told her she would have a child. And

now Sarah speaks of how everyone will laugh when they hear about her miracle of having a child.

The name Yitzchak is written in the future tense. It implies that there will be laughter in the future. And the question has been raised, why name him "laughter" because of the future? Weren't there already peals of laughter emanating from the principals? Abraham and Sarah laughed heartily and so did all the people who heard about this incredible miracle. Moreover, Rashi explains, citing the words of the Midrash that

> "Many barren women were remembered with her, many sick people were healed on that day, many prayers were answered with hers, and there was much joy in the world."

The question that arises is actually a double one:

First, why was his name in the future tense when he already evoked the laughter? His name should have therefore been *tzchok*, which simply means laughter.

Second, why did Sarah seem to suggest that the laughter associated with the birth of Isaac was the laughter of all those who would hear about his birth and the miracles they would experience? Why wouldn't it suffice that his name Yitzchak was

justified and appropriate due to the laughter of his own parents?

Two Tiers of Laughter

One could suggest an answer to these questions based on the definition of true joy and laughter. There is relative laughter and joy based on the moment's good news and there is the enduring laughter that transcends the moment.

In an earlier section of the Torah, Rashi records a heretic's argument to a Sage. Why did G-d create man if He knew that he would have to be destroyed in the Great Flood? The rabbi answered with an analogy of the birth of a child.

> "When the child is born the parents rejoice even though they know that he will eventually die. The rationale is that when it is the time for joy there is joy, when it is a time to grieve one grieves. Similarly, G-d knew that they will sin and be destroyed; nevertheless He did not refrain from creating them because of the righteous that will arise from them."

Rashi's answer to the heretic should have ended with "similarly: when G-d created the world it was a time of joy and when He destroyed it is a time to

grieve." Why does He conclude with the reference to the righteous?

It seems that Rashi is drawing a distinction between human joy and laughter and G-d's. A human being, who is finite, must live in the moment. His joy is based on what happens at that specific time. Human joy—and conversely human sorrow—is based on the here and now.

G-d, however, who is infinite and transcends the bounds of time and space, sees the ultimate future. G-d sees the righteous who will emerge from humanity, and therefore He can rejoice in the present not only because there is reason to rejoice because of the good of the moment. He can rejoice even as He knows the future destruction because G-d knows the ultimate future as well. His joy is based on both the temporal and the eternal.

When Isaac was born, there was no question that it was a source of joy for his parents. However, this joy was not the ultimate joy since nothing in the physical world lasts forever. G-d therefore named him Yitzchak, not for the present joy which is fleeting, but because Yitzchak points to the distant future—in the Messianic Age—when there will be only unmitigated and unadulterated joy.

Puzzled!

Abraham and Sarah, however, were not privy to G-d's vision of the ultimate future. So when they heard that G-d wanted their son named Yitzchak, which implied that the real joy would come in the future, we might presume that they had to be puzzled as to what future event could justify calling him Yitzchak. If his name was *tzchok*/laughter in the present tense, they would have had no problem in understanding that a child is a source of joy, especially one who was born miraculously at their ripe old age. However, to name him based on the future baffled them. What future event justifies calling him Yitzchak more than any other person?

Sarah therefore concluded that the joy of the future would be the joy shared by all the other people who would experience their own private miracle of bearing children, as mentioned in the above cited comment of Rashi. To Sarah, the joy that will be experienced by others explained why his name was in the future tense. It indicated that his birth will continue to bring joy even after he was born.

arah was not aware, at that time, that Isaac's association with laughter was connected with the much more distant future: the Messianic Age about which it is said, "Then our mouths will be filled with

laughter." Yitzchak, more than Abraham and Jacob, was a portent of the ultimate future.

Digger of Wells and Defender of Israel

The close connection of Isaac and the future redemption is echoed in the Talmudic discussion (Tractate Shabbat 89b) that cites a Biblical verse (Isaiah 63) that in the future the Jewish people will single out Isaac for recognition because he will find ways of vindicating the Jewish people. Isaac, despite his association with the Divine attribute of *gevurah*/judgment--in contradistinction to Abraham, who personified kindness and Jacob who epitomized compassion--was the Patriarch who wanted to bless his son Esau. And in the future he will find ways of defending and exonerating even the most sinful Jews making them all worthy for the future Redemption.

How can we explain this anomaly? Abraham and Jacob, the Talmud relates there, could not find the means to defend their children, but Isaac could!?

One way of answering this question is to reflect on the difference between the trait of kindness and the trait of judgment. Conventional thinking has it that a judgmental person will be harsher in judging a sinner than a person imbued with genuine kindness

and compassion. However, when one reflects on the true nature of judgment we can discover the opposite to be true.

Isaac is known for his digging wells. Chassidic thought explains that digging wells is also a metaphor for digging deeply within one's own character, probing the inner recesses of one's heart and soul. When one digs deep they will discover hidden traces of negativity that may not show up on the surface. A person with this personality of gevurah, severity, will generally be more harsh and demanding because he or she can detect even small traces of imperfection, insincerity.

However when we deal with a person who is a personification of the Divine attribute of gevurah coupled with the Torah's admonition to judge everyone favorably there is a dilemma. If one was a chesed personality it is easy to see how he or she may not see the negative lurking beneath the surface of the other or may choose to ignore it. But nothing can elude the gevurah personality. He sees even the slightest hint of impurity. How then could this gevurah oriented individual be tolerant and see the good in others?

The answer is that a human being is made up of multiple layers. There is the surface layer and the subconscious, or subliminal, levels of our character.

And while one may be a decent person on the surface he or she can be rotten to the core without even knowing it. However there is also a third level, one which is the very core of our souls that is even more deeply embedded within our psyche.

Who is most qualified to *see* that core, not just know of its existence? The answer is a gevurah personality, the well-digging Isaacs of the world.

Isaac's X-ray Vision

Isaac therefore is able to see a more fundamental and deeper aspect of a person's psyche. Thus he was thus able to see the good in Esau that others could not see. Similarly, Isaac was also able to see farther into the future at which time the core goodness of each and every one of us will be fully revealed.

We can now understand why Abraham and Jacob will not be able to defend us the way Isaac can. When the surface and even the subterranean layers of the lowliest Jews becomes so sullied, then even the kindest and most compassionate person could not find a way to justify their actions and be a good defense lawyer for them. It takes a tough prosecutor who probes to find the person's guilt but who can also probe even deeper to find exculpatory evidence that will exonerate the accused. Likewise, the true

gevurah individuals, while they can see all the underlying flaws, can also see the goodness that is latent within the innermost precincts of the person.

Yitzchak is thus the symbol of the future. Just as he can see beneath the surface of personalities where no one else can dive, so too Yitzchak will be able to see beyond the surface layers of time and space. He exclusively sees beyond the here and now.

Yitzchak's birth introduces laughter; but not the temporal laughter associated with every other birth. His was the laughter that transcended all bounds. His laughter affected everyone and did not cease. Yitzchak's laughter is the symbol of the Messianic Age about which the Psalmist says:

> "Then our mouths will be filled with laughter."

At that time we will all experience the genuine joy that can never be muted or diminished.

ESSAY FOUR

LAUGH LAST

G-d has great expectations of His people.

Particularly in our age as we stand on the cusp of the Final Redemption.

ESSAY FOUR

LAUGH LAST

Abraham's and Sarah's Laughter: Where they Different?

Abraham was told by G-d that he would father a child at the age of 100 and he laughed. G-d does not hold it against him. By contrast, in this week's parsha, when Sarah hears that she—at the age of 90—would become a mother, she also laughed, and G-d "called her on the carpet" for expressing some doubt about G-d's ability to give her a child.

Rashi and many other commentators raise the question why G-d "discriminated" against Sarah and took her to task for her laughter and not Abraham. The question is even stronger when we consider the fact that it was a far greater miracle for Sarah to become a mother at the age of 90 than it was for Abraham to become a father at the age of 100. After all, Abraham already had a child at the age of 86, whereas Sarah never had one.

Rashi's answer is that Abraham's laughter was not motivated by doubt but rather by joy, whereas Sarah's laughter was an expression of doubt.

Chassidic commentators go a step further when they explain that Sarah's laughter had been subconscious; she herself was not aware of the fact that she had laughed. This, the Sfas Emes explains is what the Torah means when it says, "And Sarah laughed within herself." Her laughter was only subconscious; she herself was not aware of that laughter.

Greater Expectations for Sarah

There is another Chassidic approach that points to the spiritual differences between Sarah and Abraham. While they were both holy and represent the highest a human being can reach in closeness and devotion to G-d, there was a difference in their approach and in the expectations G-d had of them. G-d had greater expectations of Sarah than he had for Abraham. His faulting of Sarah for laughing was due to the higher spiritual position she occupied in comparison to Abraham.

This approach complements the one of the Sfas Emes. If Sarah merely laughed subconsciously, why did G-d hold it against her? She wasn't consciously aware that she had laughed?

G-d held it against her because a woman of high spiritual character such as Sarah should have expunged all traces of doubt, even the subconscious.

The Talmud relates that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, the leader of the Jewish people at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple cried on his deathbed and exclaimed, "I don't know in which direction I will be going."

Chassidus explains that although he was the most righteous person alive he was not sure of himself because he didn't know what traces of evil might still lurk in his subconscious. And since he was so busy throughout his life to lead the Jewish people in times of their greatest crisis he never had the chance to introspect and excavate those traces of impurity.

Based on this approach, Sarah, who did have the time to introspect was expected to have known that she possessed a miniscule measure of skepticism beneath the surface and she should have eliminated it.

Living a Miraculous Life

The following exposition is partially based on the Chassidic work, *Bas Ayin* (from Rabbi Avraham Dov of Avruvsht, a disciple of Rabbi Nochum of

Chernobyl, a leading disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov's successor, the Maggid of Mezeritch).

Having a child at the age of ninety was clearly a miracle of immense proportions. In the eyes of a righteous person they are never worthy of G-d performing a miracle for them. The holier a person is the more they feel unworthy of special treatment.

There are exceptions to this rule.

When a person's life seems to be governed by different rules; when miracles become commonplace because they are recurrent, even the righteous accept them and do not doubt G-d's ability to continue performing them. To them miracles are natural.

From the time Abraham miraculously escaped the fiery furnace into which he had been thrown by King Nimrod because he refused to accede to his demands that he worship idols, Abraham knew that his life operated on a supra-rational level. His life was not governed by the norms of nature. This pattern, we might add, continued when he fought the alliance of four kings who had taken his nephew Lot captive.

Abraham's Decline

However, even the most righteous person has his ups and downs. When Abraham went down to Egypt because of the famine he feared that the Egyptians would kill him in order to take Sarah. According to the Zohar, Abraham was not concerned about Sarah because he knew that she was righteous and G-d would protect her. He was less confident about his own worthiness to be miraculously spared a horrible fate at the hands of the immoral Egyptians.

What was it that caused Abraham to think he was not worthy? Wasn't he the beneficiary of so many miracles in the past? Why would he think that it would be different now?

Egyptian Influence

Based on the foregoing exposition of the work *Bas Ayin*, it was likely attributed to the fact that when he descended into Egypt, which was then the most depraved and immoral country in the world, he felt that his spiritual level had declined. He was now not so sure that the pattern of miracles would continue for him.

The same phenomenon repeated itself when Abraham was told by G-d that he would have a

child. Abraham, at that time he had already fathered Yishmael, who was born to him through Hagar, Pharaoh's daughter. Yshmael turned out to be, like his grandfather, a negative influence in Abraham's home and life.

In Abraham's mind, Yishmael's influence had affected him as well. He was no longer above the realm of nature. In his mind, miracles were now beyond him. Abraham was, in his own mind, no different from any other person who was bound by the laws of nature.

Indeed, this is hinted in the fact that Abraham was 86 years old when he had Yishmael. The number 86 is the numerical equivalent of the word *hateva*- which means nature, or "the natural." It is also the gematria of G-d's name *Elokim*; the name associated with G-d's involvement in the process of creation.

Abraham felt deficient and could hardly fathom that he could father a child.

And while Abraham certainly knew that G-d could perform miracles for anyone if He so chooses, the righteous and humble Abraham felt uncomfortable with the notion that he would undeservedly be the beneficiary of a miracle.

Abraham was right. At that point in Abraham's life he was not a candidate for a miracle. Abraham

would have to reclaim his earlier spiritual heights and more. And at that point G-d gives him the commandment to circumcise himself and his family members. This, he was told by G-d, would make him a *tamim*, a whole person. He would be able to once again rise above the constraints of nature and father a child at the age of 100.

Abraham's Honest Self-Evaluation

Because Abraham's skepticism about fathering a child at the age of 100 was based on honest self-evaluation—that led him to the conclusion that he was at that time not capable of rising above nature in his uncircumcised state—he was not faulted for laughing, for indeed he was right.

G-d therefore tells him to circumcise himself and his entire household, including, of course, Yishmael. In this circumcised state Abraham could indeed transcend the boundaries of nature and sire a child. Even Yishmael's influence will not be the same since he too would undergo circumcision.

Sarah, on the other hand, was on a higher level than Abraham. Moreover, the incident with Sarah occurred after Abraham and Yishmael had been transformed by circumcision. It was therefore

unbecoming for her to have laughed when she heard she was going to become a mother at the age of 90.

Can we Afford to Be Skeptical?

When we hear of the predictions that have been made by our greatest leaders that we are poised to enter into the Messianic Age, an age of miracles, we can react with incredulity just as Abraham and Sarah did when they were told that they would become parents at their age. We might find it hard to believe that we are worthy of such extraordinary events happening in our lifetime.

The answer to this challenge is twofold:

First, even if we feel we have been adversely affected and influenced by the negative forces in society today, we do not have to fear. For as a people we are indeed worthy. The amount of pain and suffering we have endured—represented by the Mitzvah of circumcision—makes us eminently suited for miracles and Moshiach.

Second, if we feel that as individuals we are lacking in our spiritual life, we can correct that by "circumcising" ourselves. This means that in addition to the need to be physically circumcised, we need to apply that to our moral and spiritual lives as well. And then we will certainly be worthy of miracles.

And from the insecure or cynical laughter we will soon experience genuine laughter and joy that is associated with the future Redemption and Moshiach, as the Psalmist says: "Then we will fill our mouths with laughter."

ESSAY FIVE

THE NATURAL WAY

Some religions glorify nature.

Others shun the forces of nature.

Judaism believes that the Torah was given to elevate nature.

ESSAY FIVE

THE NATURAL WAY

G-d Appeared and Said Nothing?

Abraham, at the age of 99 complies with G-d's request to circumcise himself and his male household members. That is where we left off at the end of last week's Torah portion of *Lech Lecha*.

This week we pick up with the story of how G-d appeared to Abraham. Usually, when the Torah states that G-d appeared to someone it is followed by a message intended for that person. In this parsha, the Torah does not say for what purpose did G-d appear to Abraham. No words are spoken; no message is imparted. Why did G-d appear?

Rashi, anticipating this obvious question, responds with a quote from the Talmud: "[G-d appeared to Abraham] to visit the sick." In other words, there was, in fact, no follow up to G-d's appearing. He appeared to Abraham not to impart a specific

message, but to just be there and comfort him while he was recuperating.

Rashi, however, does not stop there. He writes that this occurred on the third day following his circumcision.

We might ask, how did Rashi derive the information that G-d's appearance to Abraham occurred on the third day? Nowhere in the text is there any hint as to when it occurred. And why would G-d wait until the third day to visit the ailing Abraham?

G-d, the Healer

The following is based on the Rebbe discourse (Likkutei Sichos, Volume 5) answer lies in a better understanding as to what G-d's visit entailed. Unlike a human visitor whose appearance at the sick bed, will give encouragement and morale support, G-d's presence in that capacity has the ability to bring about the person's recovery. When G-d appeared to Abraham, Abraham was thus healed.

When G-d conceals His presence we are compelled to follow the natural process of healing. The word nature in Hebrew, *Hateva*, actually means submerged. When G-d's presence is submerged we have no choice but to resort to the medical establishment and its remedies. Utilizing the services

of the medical community – traditional or non-traditional methods, as long as they work – is entirely proper and is within the realm of nature – the situation we are in when G-d's presence is "submerged" and concealed.

Sometimes, the natural process simply involves waiting for the body's capacity to heal itself.

Were G-d to have come to visit Abraham before the natural process of healing was complete – a process which normally takes three days – G-d would have overridden and circumvented the natural process. And as we shall see, it would have undermined the integrity of Abraham's mitzvah of circumcision.

Purpose of a Mitzvah

A basic rule of Judaism is that it was given to humans who live in a natural world (not supernatural or spiritual). The purpose of a mitzvah is to infuse the physical world with G-dly energy. This we accomplish by performing Mitzvos (G-d's precepts) utilizing the natural world. We perform Mitzvos with our bodies. Most Mitzvos involve physical objects. To perform a mitzvah with supernatural powers would defeat the purpose of doing the mitzvah.

Similarly, to perform the mitzvah of circumcision that normally takes three days for a full recovery, and to be healed miraculously by G-d's direct intervention, would have undermined the natural focus of the mitzvah.

The Boat Stops Here!

A story is told of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the Chabad Chassidic movement, that illustrates this point. When he was transported by boat from one Russian prison to another, he wished to recite the blessing on the new moon. He asked the guard rowing the boat to stop so he can say his prayer. When the guard refused, the Rebbe miraculously caused the boat to stop. The rabbi said a preliminary psalm and the boat started to move again. The rabbi asked the guard once more to stop the boat so that he could say the prayer. This time the guard complied.

The question has been raised: If the rabbi possessed the supernatural power to stop the boat, why did he have to ask the guard to do it? And the answer is that a mitzvah should be done within the parameters of the natural world.

The same is true with respect to Abraham's Mitzvah. It was the only Mitzvah at that time that

actually transformed the physical world. All other Mitzvos were more ethereal and spiritual, Circumcision was to be a model and portent of the future in terms of sanctifying the physical body and the physical world. As such, the Rebbe explains, it had to be performed without any shortcuts, otherwise it would not affect the world of nature it was intended to do.

Mitzvos of the Future

The above premise explains why Maimonides is so insistent that Moshiach does not have to perform miracles to prove that he was sent by G-d to usher in the Age of Redemption. Why is Maimonides so emphatic about this?

The Rebbe explained that Moshiach is not about altering the character of Torah and its commandments. On the contrary, the primary objective of Moshiach is to restore the Mitzvos to their original state and facilitate their observance on the most ideal of levels.

To require of Moshiach to perform miracles to establish his qualification to be Moshiach would mean that his objective is not the world of nature. That would be contrary to the entire objective of Judaism.

This does not mean that there will be no miracles in the Messianic Age. According to Maimonides, as his words were interpreted by the Rebbe, there will be two stages. In the second stage there will be miracles. However, even the supernatural events that will occur then will not overwhelm the natural process but will gradually "fit in" to it. The natural process itself will become receptive to the supernatural G-dly light.

ESSAY SIX

A REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE

In Jewish thought, there is a strong bond that connects the pioneers with those who complete the task.

The pioneers were the Patriarchs and we, the generation that will bring the Redemption, are the ones who make all the efforts of the past bear fruit.

ESSAY SIX

A REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE

Question from Diverse Perspectives

Of all the biblical stories that have elicited sharp reactions from many, the story of the Akeidah, where G-d asks Abraham to slaughter his son Isaac, stands out.

It is interesting to compare the question raised by many a non-Jewish and secular source about this narrative with the question that is raised by Jewish sources:

The non-Jewish reaction is: how G-d could have asked Abraham to perform such a cruel act.

Jewish commentators, on the other hand, express the very opposite question: what was so heroic about Abraham's act considering the fact that thousands of Jews have given their lives for G-d, without ever hearing G-d speak to them directly.

Before we attempt to answer this question, let us first analyze the difference in perspective that these two approaches reflect.

From the Jewish perspective, one cannot ask how could G-d ask of Abraham to perform an act of human sacrifice. To ask this question is to presuppose that G-d's actions are subject to human approval. How could we demand that G-d's actions or commands conform to our human sensibilities?

It was Only a Test

The reason we abhor human sacrifice is not because we have reached the logical conclusion that it is wrong. On the contrary, the reason we believe that human sacrifice is wrong and reprehensible is because G-d has told us so. The very first indication that G-d did not approve of human sacrifice can be found in the story of the Akedah. The Torah makes it clear that G-d was only testing Abraham and never intended to have him actually carry out this act. Moreover, the Torah, in subsequent books, states explicitly that human sacrifice is evil.

If one were to base their abhorrence for human sacrifice on human sensibilities, then one is admitting that it is subject to the vagaries of human based morals. Ethics and morality then becomes

situational and subject to change with the changing winds of a given society.

Once G-d told us that human sacrifice is absolutely evil; no society can change that. Moreover, it then becomes ingrained in us that it is absolutely abominable.

Perhaps, one of the ancillary lessons from the Akeidah is that morality is absolute. Whereas Abraham may have thought that can change, he leaned that it is indeed absolute and no one can come in the name of G-d and claim that are exceptions to the rule.

The question that does remain is the one from the Jewish perspective as to why Abraham is given so much credit for passing this test. Haven't countless others given their lives rather than accepting another religion?

Acted with Alacrity

There are several classical answers to this question. One school of thought reads more into the way Abraham carried out this command of G-d. Rather than act begrudgingly, Abraham left early in the morning and acted with great dispatch and alacrity **Opened the Channel**in getting to his destination.

This display of enthusiasm was indeed unique because it was a sign of his utter devotion to G-d.

Change of Nature

A second school of thought notes that Abraham's sacrifice was unique in that Abraham was the epitome of kindness. No one else was imbued with kindness comparable to Abraham.

To ask of him to sacrifice his beloved son, was the most radical departure from his obsession with love and kindness. No others were asked to go totally against their nature to the opposite extreme.

Sacrificing his Ideals

A third school takes this a step further. Abraham's entire life was devoted towards the goal of uprooting idolatry and human sacrifice. And now, Abraham was being asked to throw away his entire life's spiritual achievement and value system.

All other martyrs died for their cause; here Abraham was allowing his son to die which would do irreversible damage to his cause. All of this he was prepared to do because he perceived it to be G-d's will.

Opened the Channel

And yet a fourth school of thought considers Abraham's test to be unique because he was the one to initiate the process of self-sacrifice. Once the channels have been opened by the pioneer, everyone who follows is endowed with the potential to accomplish the same.

Abraham, the first to break ground in the area of self-sacrifice, deserved full credit and recognition for it.

We will Complete the Task

Our forebears, beginning with Abraham, have paved the way for us to do what has to be done to bring about the final redemption. And while we realize that we cannot compare to our ancestors' devotion and piety, we believe that it is we that will usher in the final redemption. This is so because they have paved the way and opened the channels for us to do that which is necessary to complete the task of bringing Moshiach.

In a way our generation's contribution is as unique as that of Abraham in light of the maxim from the Kabbalistic work, Sefer Yetzirah that "the end is wedged in the beginning." This means that there is a

special relationship the initiation of a process has with the completion of that process.

While Abraham and all the other Patriarchs were the ones to open the way, and "all beginnings are difficult," we have the unique distinction of completing the task, without which the entire process would have been for naught.

ESSAY SEVEN

HAPPY FOR SOMEONE ELSE'S HAPPINESS FOR YOU

There are many levels of happiness.

The basic level is happiness for the good we receive from G-d.

The next level is the happiness we feel for the good that others receive.

A higher level is the happiness we feel for the happiness of others.

The highest is the happiness we feel when others feel happiness for us.

ESSAY SEVEN

HAPPY FOR SOMEONE ELSE'S HAPPINESS FOR YOU

Why so Confident?

Our Matriarch Sarah at the age of ninety bears her first child! Not only was she well beyond child-bearing age, but even when she was young she was lacking the reproductive mechanism for her to give birth at any time. One can only imagine the joy Sarah experienced at the miraculous birth of her son Isaac, whose very name means laughter and joy. This incident which comprised multiple miracles and the source of her incredible joy is described as follows in this week's parsha:

> "Sarah said, "G-d has made me happy! Whoever hears will be happy for me."

Why was Sarah so confident that all those who would hear of here miracle would rejoice for her?

Rashi, quoting the Midrash, anticipated this question and clarifies why so many people would rejoice for Sarah:

> "Many barren women were remembered with her, many sick people were healed on that very day; many prayers were answered with hers, and there was much joy in the word."

In other words, on that very day that G-d performed the miracle and she gave birth to a child, many other women who were childless also had children. Moreover, all those who were in need of anything were helped. Hence they were happy, indirectly, because of her miracle.

Rashi reaches this conclusion based on the assumption that it was unlikely that given the moral level of humanity at that time that everyone would rejoice for Sarah's sake. Hence Rashi (and the Midrash) conclude that when Sarah's miracle occurred so did similar miracles occur for others. As a result everyone was happy.

One could wonder why it was so important that everyone be happy at that time.

Going out of Your Own Shell

Ksav Sofer (a nineteenth century Sage) explains that righteous people of the caliber of Sarah are not happy when something good happens to them that is denied others. Only when others are granted the

same blessing do the truly righteous feel good about their own good fortune. Hence, only after everyone experienced a similar result as she was Sarah completely happy as well.

And this is presumably the meaning of the phrase:, "G-d has made me happy! Whoever hears will be happy for me." "Sarah was in effect saying: "What has made me happy: "The fact that whoever hears will be happy."

To be sure, Sarah would have been thrilled and grateful for having a child even if no other person was similarly blessed. But her joy would have not been complete.

True Joy

The rationale for this is based on the understanding of true joy. When a person is self-absorbed he or she is always focused on what he or she is missing. People have great expectations of what they deserve and what they were denied.

Only when we are able to go out of our own shell and focus on the needs of others can we feel true joy because we live for others. Indeed, we are happy no matter how G-d deals with us because we don't expect to get more; whatever we receive we feel is a gift and rejoice with it. However, our joy is marred

by the absence of these gifts to others. But when we see how others are likewise blessed our joy is now double joy: joy for the other and also joy for our own blessing.

Why "for Me"?

However, there is still some difficulty here. If our premise was that people would not be happy for Sarah; rather their joy was caused by their own personal miracles that they experienced, why does the Torah state: "whoever hears will be happy for me." Why "for me?" Their happiness was for themselves!

Upon further reflection there is even a more profound lesson about the greatness of Sarah and how we should experience true happiness.

When Sarah's miracle of childbirth extended to other barren women, her joy was magnified because of the joy that they experienced. Initially they were happy because they experienced their own personal miracle. To them it was not in any way connected to her miracle. The fact that they had this miracle happening at the same time that a great miracle occurred with Sarah was to them perhaps a mere coincidence. Perhaps they were not even aware of her miracle. Nonetheless, Sarah was ecstatic that G-d

had performed these miracles for others and that she was not the only one to enjoy G-d's beneficence.

It Rubbed Off

But, after these people began to reflect on the kindness G-d had shown them, and after they had heard about the unparalleled miracle that Sarah experienced, they realized that it was not a coincidence. They realized that their good fortune was a consequence of Sarah's miracle. Sarah as the righteous and holy woman she served as a conduit of G-d's blessings to the entire world. And the more people realized the connection between their blessing and Sarah's the more they began to rejoice at her miracle. They began to feel a kinship to her and a sense of joy at her good fortune began to permeate them.

In other words, Sarah's trait of wanting to share her blessings with others eventually rubbed off on them. They too began to feel good because of her blessings.

At this point, Sarah's joy was also magnified. Now she was happy not only because of her miracle. Not only was she happy because G-d showered His miracles and kindness on others as well. She was also overjoyed that the other recipients of G-d's

blessings had matured to the point that they were happy for her sake!

Now we can understand the Sarah's statement: "G-d has made me happy! Whoever hears will be happy for me." Sarah's happiness at this point was due to the fact that others were also happy and that their happiness was because she was blessed; a mature happiness.

Reaching the Number 50

One of the human frailties that will be corrected in the Messianic Age is our self-centeredness. We are so self-absorbed that we do not appreciate our blessings. Even the miracles that abound in our lives do not induce much joy.

Even when we do feel good about our blessings we think solely of our own good fortune we can often disregard the plight of others. We may not be bothered by their suffering or uplifted by their salvation. This is a symptom of exile.

In a state of Redemption we will always count our blessings and rejoice for them. Moreover, our joy will be enhanced when we realize that others were also rewarded with goodness. But our joy will be complete when we see, as Sarah did, how others

have grown to appreciate the good fortune of others as well.

Thus the Psalmist declares: "Then our mouths will be filled with laughter." And, indeed, the very name Isaac is in the future tense: "Then he shall laugh." No matter how much we can rejoice for the other there are two impediments for our joy to be complete:

First, there are so many who are still suffering and stymied in exile. There is so much pain and anguish for all sorts of reasons. By definition, no one's joy can be complete as long as exile with its attendant suffering persists.

Second, the fact that G-d's presence is filtered and obscured in exile and we are not capable of experiencing the full expression of G-dliness, then we cannot totally transcend ourselves.

Even the great Tzadik is constrained by exile. The one who has reached the penultimate level of 49 gates of understanding finds himself or herself locked into that state and yearns to attain the ultimate 50th level. He is sick with love and passion to experience all of G-d's glory.

The word for "sick" in Hebrew "*choleh"* has the numerical value of 49. The tzadik is therefore also constrained and therefore his joy is marred, not only

because he suffers along with others who suffer, nut because he himself is sick with love.

Thus Moshiach contains the letters *yismach*; he shall rejoice, because Moshiach will unveil the 50th level which will usher in an age of total freedom from all suffering because G-d's glory will heal all of the world's ailments from the literal forms of illness and pain, including the removal of the pain upon reaching the elusive 50th level.

Moreover, the letters of Moshiach can also spell *yiamach,* which means he will bring joy to others. Whatever holy, unmitigated joy he will experience he will shower on others; we too shall bask in the light and joy of the 50th gate of understanding!

ESSAY EIGHT

DIETARY LAWS OBSERVED

The saga of Abraham and the angels teaches us something about what makes humans unique and even superior to angels.

That is why we received the Torah and not them.

ESSAY EIGHT

DIETARY LAWS OBSERVED

Angelic Lapse

This week's parsha describes the incredible hospitality of Abraham. Abraham was recovering from his circumcision and G-d did not want him to be troubled by people knocking on his door for food and lodging in his oasis hotel. G-d, therefore, made it so uncomfortably hot that no human being would venture outside. Abraham was perturbed, He had no one to wait on and express his unbounded kindness.

Seeing how Abraham was suffering because there were no guests, G-d sent him three angels "disguised" as humans, whom he served with relish.

Included in his gourmet meal was butter and meat, seemingly ignoring the law that prohibits the mixing of meat and dairy. This apparently would not pose a problem because Abraham lived before the Torah was given at Sinai and there was no obligation to refrain from eating milk and meat. And even though our Sages tell us that Abraham had prophetically

anticipated the laws of the Torah and observed them, nevertheless, he was not required to impose his extra-legal standards on his guests.

The Midrash, interestingly, uses this angelic "lapse" as ammunition against the angels. To understand this matter a few words of background are necessary.

When G-d gave the Torah to the Jewish people, Moses had to climb Mount Sinai where he spent forty days and forty nights studying the Torah and was getting ready to come down with the encapsulated and engraved version of it (i.e., the Two Tablets), whereupon the angels lodged a formal protest to G-d: "Give your glory to the (residents of the) heavens (i.e. leave the Torah with angels)," imploring G-d not to give it to the lowly mortals.

The Talmud and Midrash record several of the responses Moses gave the angels. In one Midrashic account, Moses' was made to resemble that of Abraham. He then challenged the angels, why they had violated the words of the Torah, when they were guests in Abraham's home. Moses' argument prevailed and the rest is history; the Torah is ours, not the angels.

The Midrash, as part of the Torah's Oral tradition, conveys reliable historical information as well as profound messages, not cute legends, G-d forbid.

The fact that it was the violation of the laws against the eating of milk and meat that determined that the Torah would be ours and not the angels, suggests that there is a crucial message conveyed to us with respect to this prohibition and our role as humans.

Three Reasons for Not Mixing Milk and Meat

Although the prohibition of eating milk and meat is essentially a Divine command, nevertheless, several rationalizations have been offered for this commandment.

One explanation, based on Maimonides writings, is that it is our way of showing utter rejection of all forms of idolatry, including the idolatrous practices that involved cooking a kid in the milk of its mother.

A second explanation suggests that this prohibition was intended to make us sensitive to the feelings of all of G-d's creatures, especially other humans.

A third rationale argues that this prohibition is intended to make us have respect for the integrity of each of G-d's species. We should not try to "play G-d" by mixing and diluting the diverse forces in this world thereby eradicating the differences that exist in favor of a uniform, homogenized existence.

Angels strike out: Strike One

Angels do not have to be reminded not to create and worship other gods.

Angels do not suffer from the human condition that impels them to create their own gods. That syndrome is a direct consequence of the free choice and independence we were given. That free spirit can go to our head and make us feel that we can create our own gods.; indeed, we can even deify ourselves, as did Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar and other powerful monarchs.

An angel is no more than a messenger of G-d (in fact, the simple translation of the Hebrew word for angel is *malach*, which means messenger). Humans are independent beings, angels are Divine instruments. They are at all times subordinated to G-d's will.

Strike Two: No Sensitivity

Angels don't have to be taught sensitivity, because they cannot be insensitive. Moreover, they can't be sensitive either, even if they tried. Angels are beyond or beneath sensitivity.

An angel is a robot, a spiritual computer that cannot show feelings and be sensitive to others. While Michael is the anel of love and Gabriel of Fear, these

are emotions that were programmed into them and defines their relationship with G-d. They cannot change their emotions

Hence the lesson of not cooking a kid in the milk of its mother would be lost on angels. Humans are sensitive beings, angels are Divine instruments.

Strike Three: No Multi-Tasking

Strike three: Angels are incapable of multi-tasking. Angles are limited to one function at a time. Angels cannot combine different talents and faculties. Humans are multi-faceted and complex beings. They are constantly struggling with competing interests and drives. Their greatest challenge, perhaps, is to learn how to find the proper balance in their lives. In the pursuit of this balance one can try to eliminate or suppress the diverse forces in one's life.

For example, a person who is conflicted between selfless acts of kindness and the competing need to be self-serving in order to survive, might suppress one or the other because it may be too difficult to be both selfless and selfish. In truth, the Torah tells us that we must combine both traits. We must be kind to others but not forget our own needs.

Eliminating one or the other is akin to cooking a kid in the milk where one eliminates the stark

differences between these two very distinct foods. Milk symbolizes the ultimate model for nurturing. Meat, which develops with the input of a tremendous amount of nourishment, is the model for self-interests.

In Kabbalah, we're told that milk is chesed and meat is gevura. The nature of chesed is to give, the nature of gevurah is to withhold, keep for oneself. In the interests of balancing the two we cannot afford to have one become subordinate, or worse, be absorbed by the other.

Only humans have the challenge of striking the right balance. Angels don't have to deal with conflicting emotions and movements. It's so much easier to be an angel.

The Unique Human Condition

In summation: Humans are free-spirited, affective and complex creatures that need the Torah in general and the prohibition against mixing milk and meat in particular to guarantee that they don't create their own gods, are sensitive to others, and know how to balance and properly combine competing drives without destroying or compromising any of them.

Milk and Meat of the Future

There is a Midrashic reference to the opinion that the prohibition against eating milk and meat will not exist in the Messianic Age. Conceptually, this can be understood in light of the foregoing analysis of the difference between angels and humans. In the Messianic Age we will no longer have the challenge of letting our independence create our own gods. Our human sensitivity will be refined and heightened so we don't have to worry about hurting the feelings of others. And we will be so much better equipped to maintain the proper balance in our lives in ways that do not threaten any other forces that exist and ought to be preserved.

ESSAY NINE

THE DESERT, LAND AND SEA

All of life's challenges are best met when we approach them with the Abrahamic virtue of love and kindness.

ESSAY NINE

THE DESERT, LAND AND SEA

Angels Masquerading

After having been circumcised at the age of 99, Abraham—this week's parsha begins—was sitting outside his tent when he "lifted his eyes and saw, and behold three men were standing over him." Abraham promptly invited them into his home and served them a lavish meal.

According to our Sages, these three men were actually angels sent to Abraham in the "disguise" of men.

The Midrash relates that these three angels were not only disguised as people, each one of them assumed a different human role. One angel was dressed as a "desert merchant," a second angel appeared like a "produce merchant," while the third angel resembled a "captain of a ship."

The Midrash is known for transmitting profound ideas in deceptively simple commentary. What did the Midrash mean to teach us by highlighting these

three roles of the "desert merchant," "produce merchant" and "sea captain?"

World Divided into Three

Commentaries explain that the world is divided into three parts: water, desert, and inhabited land. Each part of the world has an angel in heaven appointed over it. Thus, the three disguised angels represented the entire creation. The one dressed as a desert merchant was "in charge" of the deserts, the captain "oversaw" the oceans and the produce merchant "represented" the inhabited section of the world.

But why did these three angels who represented the three parts of the earth have to show up in the aftermath of Abraham's circumcision? And why does the Midrash highlight these three roles?

World Created for Abraham

To answer this question we must refer back to a verse in the beginning of Genesis, where the account of the creation of the world is given. At the end of the detailed account of creation the Torah sums it all up in one verse:

> "These are the chronicles of heaven and earth when they were created."

The Hebrew word for the phrase "when they were created" is *b'hibaram*, which when rearranged can read *b'Avraham*, or "for the sake of Abraham." This was meant to suggest that the entire world was created for the sake of Abraham.

When did Abraham attain the level that justified the creation of the world? It was after he had undergone circumcision. At that point Abraham had reached the state of perfection (relatively speaking). To demonstrate to Abraham that he had attained this lofty level of perfection, the representative angels of all segment of the world presented themselves to Abraham, as if to say, "We are here for you." The entire world is here for you.

Every Person is Obligated to Say, "Because of Me the World was Created."

In moral and ethical terms one of the messages this Midrash conveys is that when we devote our lives to perfecting self and bringing perfection to the entire world—which is what circumcision symbolizes—we can justifiably say that the entire world was created for our sake. As the Talmud declares:

> "Every person is obligated to say, "Because of me the world was created."

The world at large is also reflected in the miniature

world—the human being.

Response to Our Internal Desert, Produce and Sea.

We also possess a desert, produce and sea. The desert is the part of us that seems barren, unproductive. There is also our productive side, the part of us that is fertile and vibrant. The sea, often visited by storm winds that are unparalleled and that have sunk many a ship, symbolizes the stormy parts of our lives.

All of these elements must come to the Abraham—I.e., love and kindness, the traits that were personified by Abraham—within us. When we feel like a desert, barren and parched, unmotivated and lethargic, we must send these "angels to our Abraham, we must look to do something positive, an act of love and kindness for another. This will turn the desert part of us into a blooming oasis.

When we feel motivated and full of energy, when we are on a role and producing at a feverish pace, we must "send" this trait to our internal Abraham. While we are focused on personal growth and advancement, we must not neglect our role as Abrahams, reaching out to others with consideration and kindness.

And when we try to navigate the stormy waters of

the sea, hoping to find dry land and a haven from the unpredictability of life at sea, we must send our captain to Abraham for guidance. One cannot weather the storms of life without direction from the part of our soul that is filled with a passion for G-d and our fellow human being.

Preparing for Moshiach through the Prism of Abraham

All three symbols, desert, fruit and the sea, are also metaphors for the time of exile we are about to leave. Exile has been paradoxically spiritually barren as well as a time of incredible growth. Our passage through this period of exile has been punctuated with fierce storms that ravaged our lives causing many a Jewish "boat" to sink.

On our way out of this exile towards the future Redemption we must always focus our attention on Abraham and the love and kindness he personified. And while there are many positive approaches to life, the approach of love, represented by Abraham, must be the dominant one. Particularly in this transitional period we are in now—going from exile to Redemption—the message of bringing all of our angels—I.e., forces and faculties—to our internal Abraham, to follow his approach of love and compassion.

ESSAY TEN

WHEN GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS COUNTS

Many have wondered which is preferable:

Good and sincere intentions without action or action without sincerity,

The answer is action that impacts the world trumps sincerity without action.

However, Judaism's ideal is to combine the two.

ESSAY TEN

WHEN GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS COUNTS

Abraham's Pain

Abraham was sitting at the opening of his tent in the heat of the day. What was Abraham doing outside on such a hot day? Our Sages note that, as recounted in the end of last week's Torah portion, Abraham had just undergone circumcision at the age of 99! It was thus crucial that Abraham would rest from this ordeal. That was not to be, however, since Abraham could not bear not serving as a gracious host to the many wayfarers who passed his tent. To ensure that Abraham would not be troubled by guests, G-d made the heat so unbearable that no living being would dare venture out that day.

This did not help. Abraham was more troubled by his inability to serve others than by the physical pain that he was experiencing due to the circumcision. To alleviate Abraham's emotional pain, G-d then sent him three angels disguised as humans,

so that Abraham could fulfill the Mitzvah of *Hachnosas Orchim* (hospitality).

The Torah then proceeds to recount the extent to which Abraham went to "feed" his guests. And most remarkable was the fact that G-d had been talking to Abraham when the three "guests" arrived. Abraham abruptly curtailed his communication with the A-mighty to serve his celestial visitors in the disguise of men. From this incident our sages derive the lesson that hospitality is even greater than greeting the Divine presence!

An Exercise in Futility?

This entire incident raises a very good question. Granted, G-d wanted Abraham not to experience any emotional pain at not being able to fulfill the mitzvah of *Hachnosas orchim* (entertaining guests), so he sent him three angels disguised as humans. But, if they were not truly human and did not need his food and lodging, of what avail was G-d's gesture to Abraham? Did Abraham really accomplish anything by feeding angels who only went through the motions of eating?

It also seemed that Abraham's interruption of his communication with G-d was unwarranted, inasmuch as the guests whom he was entertaining

were not real guests and Abraham performed no mitzvah in hosting them!

Pre-Sinai Dynamics

The answer, provided by the Rebbe (*Likkutei Sichos* Volume 5), lies in a better understanding of the function of Mitzvos that we perform now – post Sinai – as compared with the Mitzvos that were performed by the Patriarchs before the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

At Mount Sinai, G-d gave us more than just a litany of new obligations and responsibilities. G-d also gave us the ability to instill divine holiness within the secular, mundane and finite world. In addition, a mitzvah is a way to enable us to express our own spiritual potential.

Prior to the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, a Mitzvah did not possess the ability to change the world and make it G-dly. When Abraham – and others who observed certain Mitzvos – their observance was not intended to change the world but to enable them to do to spiritual "exercises" that would release their own spiritual potential and condition themselves and their descendants to act in a compassionate manner.

To accomplish this objective, it made no difference that Abraham was serving angels who did not really benefit by his hospitality. What counted – then, before Sinai – was that Abraham would act in the most compassionate and loving way, so as to express his own spiritual potential and condition and sensitize the world to follow his example.

Once his progeny was so conditioned, they were ready for an even greater challenge: to change the world around them as well as enhancing their own spiritual state.

Is the Lesson Outdated?

One can ask the question why the Torah needed to tell us this story of Abraham going through the motions of hospitality, if after Sinai the dynamics of the Mitzvos changed. Now, the Mitzvah must impact the world. Why relate the Mitzvah of Abraham that did not bring about that effect?

The answer is that we ae always preparing for the giving of the Torah anew, since we receive the Torah every day. One of the preparations for the Torah is to condition ourselves to act kindly and elicit our soul's spiritual energy. Just to change the world without allowing our own feelings to emerge

would constitute a deficient form of doing the Mitzvah.

The Mitzvos that we now observe thus serve a dual function: they enhance our own lives as they alter the world and lead the world inexorably to the Messianic Age when the cumulative effect of all the Mitzvos will permanently transform the world into a dwelling place for G-d.

ESSAY ELEVEN

SLOUCHING TOWARDS GEMARA

Evil has to be fought on all fronts.

We must focus on evil actions as well as evil ideas.

ESSAY ELEVEN

SLOUCHING TOWARDS GEMARA

Two Primary Symbols of Corruption

Sodom and Gomorrah (anglicized version of *S'dom* and *Amorah*) are the two cities, discussed in this week's parsha, that have become the symbols of corruption, cruelty, sleaze, degenerate behavior and everything else evil. Sodom and Gomorrah were actually two of five cities whose inhabitants were evil and were ultimately destroyed. Yet when the Prophet Isaiah (1:10) castigates the Jews for their immoral behavior, he likens them to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah exclusively. It seems that these two cities were the primary sources of moral depravity for that entire region.

The question arises. If the behavior of the Sodomites and the Gomorrites were identical, why would the prophet separate them into two distinct categories? It seems that despite their similarities there was a nuance of difference between the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Evil Action Versus Evil Thought

We can gain some insight into the differences between Sodom and Gomorrah and the relevance it has to today's world from the way in which the prophet Isaiah refers to them:

Isaiah declares:

> "Listen to the word of the L-rd leaders of Sodom, hearken to the Torah of our G-d, nation of Gomorrah."

It is noteworthy that the prophet uses the expressions "word of the L-rd" when rebuking the Jews who were like the leaders of Sodom, whereas the expression "the Torah of our G-d" is used to challenge the people who have emulated the nation of Gomorrah.

It would appear, that the Jewish leaders who were compared to the Sodomites, were accused primarily of evil behavior. They were thus told to listen to the "word of the L-rd," a reference to the clear and unequivocal directives of G-d. As the Talmud states: "The word of G-d – this is Halacha (Jewish law).

The Gomorrites — and those people likened to them — by contrast, were depraved in the way their **thought** processes worked. They were not as evil in their actions as they were in their ideas. Or, their evil behavior stemmed from their evil mindset.

For them it was necessary to be exposed to the "Torah of our G-d." They had to study and master the teachings of Torah which help shape and mold the Jewish mindset and weltanschauung.

There are some Jews whose spiritually wanting lifestyle is a direct consequence of their distorted sense of priorities, that reveals a serious lack of appreciation for the attitudes that the Torah stands for. To merely be made aware of the definitive and dogmatic "word of G-d" without exposing them to the conceptual and spiritual basis of these laws, would not really change their attitudes and mindsets.

Thus, they were told to study "the Torah of our G-d," an expression that is used to describe the theoretical truths that can be found even in the conflicting opinions of our sages.

The Talmud relates that even when there are differences of opinion between the School of Hillel and the School of Shamai, they are both to be regarded as the "words of the living G-d." Recognizing the fact that one cannot follow both opinions, the Talmud still insists that we learn the logic of the School of Shammai just as we must learn the logic of the School of Hillel, whose opinions invariably prevailed. This is so because every opinion that is based on Torah is an

expression of a Divine truth that helps to shape and mold the way we think.

The Definitive Word of G-d for the Sodomites

To counter the more pronounced depravity of Sodom, however, one must accentuate commitment to the "word of the L-rd" that denotes the unequivocal and singular authority of Halacha. A Sodomite person is one whose cruelty and insensitivity have reached the nadir.

Moshiach In Sodom

Our Sages thus say that Moshiach can be found in Sodom. This means, among other interpretations, that Moshiach's role is to reach out even to the very lowest levels of society and to uplift it. This is done by emphasizing the need for practical commitment to the dictates of the Torah that emanate from the very essence of G-d.

But for the more mild form of the evil mindset characterized by the Gomorrites, one must advocate the theoretical study of Torah. By imbibing the logic of Torah, through the study of Talmud, or Gemara (pun intended), permeated with the realization that it is "the Torah of our G-d," that we acquire by studying the inner dimension of Torah (mysticism

and Chassidus), we can defeat the evil mindset of Gomorrah.

It is worth noting the current proliferation of the study of Gemara and Chasidic thought, as well as a return to the practice of Halacha by many, is a sign of the times. We are so close to "finding Moshiach in Sodom," when the world that has been slouching towards Sodom and Gomorrah, is becoming a world that is scaling the heights of G-dly knowledge and commitment.

ESSAY TWELVE

HOME SWEET HOME

Of the three human necessities, food, clothing and shelter, the Torah places an even greater emphasis on shelter.

Shortage of food makes us hungry.

Lack of clothing renders us cold.

Homelessness denies us our human dignity.

ESSAY TWELVE

HOME SWEET HOME

Overriding Greeting G-d

One of the most important forms of kindness is performed through *Hachnasas Orchim*-hospitality. Abraham, the first Jew, who had demonstrated his kindness in so many ways, outdid himself in this week's Torah portion by serving his three guests, despite his infirmed state — recuperating from circumcision.

So powerful is the Mitzvah of *Hachnasas Orchim*, inviting guests into one's home, that it even overrides greeting G-d Himself. This lesson was derived by the Talmud from the beginning of this week's Parsha, which opens with the statement that G-d appeared to Abraham. No sooner does Abraham see his three potential guests, he interrupts his encounter with G-d, and instead runs towards the three people, disguised as angels, invites them into his house, takes care of their every need. Despite the fact that he was just communicating with G-d,

Abraham realized that it was more important to perform the Mitzvah of hospitality.

Why is hospitality so great a mitzvah that it justified Abraham's "ignoring" G-d, as it were, to entertain his guests?

Removing the Scourge of (Temporary) Homelessness

The answer lies in a better understanding of hospitality. The Mitzvah of hospitality is not simply inviting a friend over for a cup of tea, or even a full meal. That is also a Mitzvah, because any act of friendship expressed expresses and generates greater unity. However, the Mitzvah of hospitality applies primarily to inviting individuals into one's home who are traveling and are therefore either permanently or temporarily without a home. Thus, when one performs the Mitzvah of *Hachnasas Orchim*, they remove the curse of homelessness from that individual.

The Talmud states that "a person who does not have a home is not a person." It does not say that a person without food is not a person. Why is the lack of a home more fundamentally a repudiation of their humanity than the lack of other necessities? Also, why would the Talmud demean a helpless person who doesn't have a home?

My Home is My Castle

A human being is a multi-layered creature. And only limited aspects of our personality are ever expressed. For example, when we are in a public situation, only that public or peripheral layer of our humanity is expressed. In a social setting, it is the social layer of our personalities that are being expressed. When we teach, for example, only the intellectual layer of our personality manifests itself. The core of who we are, the essence of our identities, however, can remain elusive even from ourselves.

Where does a person express himself the way he or she truly is? Where does one's true humanity have the opportunity to assert itself? Only when we are in our own home can we be ourselves and express our innermost being.

Thus, when a person has no home, they lack the ability to fully express themselves; to be themselves. The innermost aspects of their personalities remain suppressed. When our Sages stated that a person without a home is not a complete person, it was not intended as an insult, but rather as a description of the full human potential that must be allowed to blossom by providing everyone with a home.

We can now appreciate the greatness of the Mitzvah of hospitality. When a person is on the road and lacks a place where they can dwell, the Mitzvah of

hospitality not only provides them with a roof over their heads and with food and drink. It gives them a home away from home, enabling the guest to express a greater measure of humanity. We made a complete human being out of this person.

G-d's Need for a Home

Our Sages in the Midrash teach us that G-d too needs a "home." When we perform any of the Mitzvos (G-d's commandments) we also, in effect, perform the Mitzvah of hospitality, by inviting G-d into our homes, so that He feels comfortable in our midst and that He can express His true essence.

This is why Judaism puts such a great emphasis on the coming of Moshiach, because at that time, G-d will finally have a permanent dwelling place in our world. Without this dwelling place, G-d only expresses His "outer" dimensions, when we perform Mitzvos and particularly in the Messianic Age, we will be able to experience the revelation of the very essence of G-d that can only be expressed when one has a home.

ESSAY THIRTEEN

IN THE MIDST OF THE CITY

A few Inspirational People can Change an Entire City.

A few good deeds, nay, even one, can save the world and bring Moshiach!

ESSAY THIRTEEN

IN THE MIDST OF THE CITY

Bleeding Heart?

Abraham, the first Jew—it is recorded in this week's parsha—distinguishes himself in yet another way.

When G-d tells him about His plans to destroy the wicked city of Sodom, Abraham pleads for them. The inhabitants of Sodom were total strangers and were indeed guilty of some of the most heinous crimes. Yet Abraham implores G-d to abort His plan for their annihilation.

This action of Abraham might elicit a sense of admiration by some for his concern for all people, but might also "turn people off" to his "bleeding heart" attitude towards the perpetrators of the cruelest acts, while apparently showing insensitivity for their victims.

Asking for Two Things

Upon closer examination, Abraham was not asking G-d to let the criminals get away with it. He was

concerned that G-d do an injustice and allow the innocent to die with the guilty. In Abraham's words: "Will you also destroy the righteous with the wicked."

However, Abraham follows up that reasonable argument based on justice with a second perplexing one:

> "Perhaps there are fifty righteous men in the midst of the city. Will you still destroy it, and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people who are in it?"

Abraham then reverts to his original argument when he says:

> "It would be profane for You to do such a thing, to put to death the righteous with the wicked, equating the innocent and the guilty... Would the Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?"

Rashi explains that Abraham was, in fact, asking G-d for two things. First, he demanded that G-d not do an injustice by destroying the righteous. Second, he challenged G-d to spare even the wicked for the sake of the righteous.

This however brings us back to our original question: Why did Abraham care so much for those

who deserved to be punished for their unspeakable cruelty?

A few Inspirational People can Change an Entire City

The answer seems to be provided by the Torah itself when it quotes Abraham:

> "Perhaps there are fifty righteous men in the midst of the city." Why did he add the words "in the midst (of the city)?"

When Abraham spoke of righteous people "in the midst of the city" he was referring to people who were intimately involved with the people of the community and had the capacity of exercising a measure of influence over them. Thus, Abraham argued, there is no good reason to destroy the wicked people; eventually they will all change for the good because of the influence of the relatively righteous people.

Indeed, Abraham's mission to the world was to be the one who would change the direction of the entire world. Abraham started a monotheistic and moralistic revolution in a world steeped in paganism and hedonism. How then could G-d—who entrusted Abraham with this mission—not appreciate the value of sparing even the wicked, when the

righteous could serve as a positive influence over them.

Looking for Someone who Carea

One can also find an additional insight implicit in Abraham's reference to the righteous being "in the midst" of the city. Abraham knew that there were no genuinely righteous people in Sodom. How then could he speak of fifty, when he knew that there probably was not even one truly righteous person? Even his nephew Lot, who was eventually spared, was hardly a paragon of virtue. He was spared because of Abraham, and that, by comparison with the others, he was a saint.

Abraham thus was trying to find some redeeming quality possessed by some of the Sodomites. Perhaps, Abraham wondered, there were fifty people, whose righteousness was that they were "in the midst of the city," i.e., they took the concerns of the city seriously.

Perhaps these civic minded individuals would be regarded as being relatively righteous. The fact that they had this spark of goodness embedded in them; that they would situate themselves "in the midst of the city" to take care of the community's needs, demonstrated that they were salvageable. This would

prove that they were not entirely evil, and that they would, in turn—with some help from people like Abraham—be able to turn things around for the entire community.

G-d response was that, in fact, there was not even a vestige of goodness in this community. It had so degenerated that there was not even a redeeming quality to be found in Sodom, and as such their fate would be sealed.

Abraham's Legacy

Abraham's legacy to us is to look for the good wherever it exists and cultivate it so that it can affect others.

Abraham's approach is echoed in the way Maimonides describes how we are to view ourselves and the entire world:

Imagine that all of our deeds are placed on a scale which is evenly balanced between good and evil. Even one minute, apparently insignificant act of goodness and kindness, can tip the scales in our favor and in the favor of the entire world. One good deed can literally save humanity by virtue of its ripple effect.

This powerful message is rooted in Abraham's plea for the people of Sodom. Even one redeeming act of

goodness, he felt, could spread and affect the entire community.

The Power of One Good Deed

Alas that did not exist in Sodom, but it certainly exists today as we are poised to enter into the Messianic Age.

Now, more than ever, every G-dly act should be encouraged and appreciated for its ability to turn the tide and bring us over the top. This will remove the destructive forces of exile—that are analogous to the destruction of Sodom—and usher in an age of ultimate righteousness, kindness and G-dliness through Moshiach, who is characterized in Biblical and Talmudic literature as being one who is imbued with a sense of justice and compassion for all.

ESSAY FOURTEEN

THREE TIERED TARRYING

One of the challenges to our belief and anticipation for Moshiach is the fear of change.

We can overcome that fear when we realize that all of the changes will seamlessly fit into our lives and unmitigated good will follow.

ESSAY FOURTEEN

THREE TIERED TARRYING

Taking Lot by the Hand

This week's parsha chronicles the destruction of the city of Sodom. Only Lot and his immediate family were spared because of their association with Abraham. The Torah then records how at dawn the angels sent to destroy the city were pressuring Lot to leave:

> "Arise, take your wife and your two daughters who are found, lest you shall be destroyed because of the iniquity of the city."

Instead of heeding their urgent demand for Lot to leave and the explicit threat that he too might become a victim of Sodom's destruction, the Torah continues by saying:

> "And he tarried." This forced the angels to literally take Lot and his family by their hands and get them out of the city.

Shalsheles Procrastination

The Hebrew word for "and he tarried" is *Vayismahmah*. This word is intriguing because of the rare musical note attached to it called *shalsheles*. The word *shalsheles* means a chain and indeed the note looks something like a chain and it is chanted in a manner where the reader goes higher and higher no less than three times.

What is the significance of this note and why is it attached to this word in particular?

The obvious answer is that the *shalsheles* note indicates stretching. And indeed Lot was stretching and procrastinating. Lot was twisting and turning.

The question now, however, is why did he procrastinate and why does the Torah make a point of emphasizing his tarrying with both the word and its musical note? And why is it indicated by a note that has three twists?

Didn't Believe G-d Would Destroy Sodom

Is it possible that Lot did not really believe the angels that the city would be destroyed? There is precedent for this in an earlier parsha, where Noach was compelled by G-d to enter the Ark which prompts Rashi's comment:

> "Noach was not a firm believer, he believed and didn't believe the flood would occur."

Now if Noach, who was a perfectly righteous person, had his doubts about the fulfillment of G-d's threat to destroy the world, certainly Lot may have had some doubts of his own about the impending disaster in Sodom.

The comparison to Noach, though, is not a good one. Noach was convinced that G-d, the epitome of kindness, would never destroy His world and that the building of the Ark and the threat of a flood was G-d's way of getting people to shape up. It was, therefore, hard for him to believe that G-d would really destroy the world.

Lot, on the other hand, is never described as a righteous person. He was saved not in his own merit but in the merit of his uncle Abraham. It is more plausible to think that Lot's tarrying had less to do with his belief in G-d's goodness and more about his weaknesses and moral lapses. Moreover, the very fact that he sought to live in the world's most corrupt city is an indication that he too was far from being a paragon of virtue.

Lot's Three Fears

A more plausible explanation for Lot's tardiness is his attachment to his home and the city that kept him and he was loath to abandon it so quickly. He wanted to make the transition gradually. Abrupt changes are difficult for people.

In fact, if we delve more deeply into why people do not change quickly, one can discern three reasons:

(a) There is a certain familiarity and attachment to the place where we live. The Talmud states: "The charm of a place is on its residents." People develop attachments to their homes and cities.

(b) There is a fear of change no matter how bad the previous situation was. A prisoner may experience fear prior to his release from prison.

(c) There is also a fear of the unknown challenges that the future will bring.

Thus the musical note that accompanies the word "*vayismahmah*-and he tarried" consists of three twists and turns. There are three hurdles and roadblocks that contributed to Lot's tarrying.

Lot was comfortable in Sodom. According to Rashi, he was a highly respected member of the community and was appointed to be a judge. He

enjoyed great affluence and was welcome in a city that was notorious for its hatred of outsiders. He genuinely took a liking for this horrible place.

Lot was also afraid of change no matter how good the change would be for him. He had to first psych himself up to the prospects that he was going to a new place.

And thirdly, he was terrified of the future challenges and that he would be judged. Lot feared how he would fare in any place outside of Sodom. Indeed, the Torah tells us as much when it records how Lot begged to be able to stay in the city of Tzoar rather than go all the way. He was terrified of going up to the mountain where he was originally told to go. Why?

Rashi explains that he knew that he was not worthy of the future when compared to his uncle

Abraham. In Sodom, Lot was a tzadik. Relative to the inhospitable, wicked, sadistic, corrupt, profoundly immoral Sodomites, Lot was a shining star. Once out of Sodom, living in the shadow of his righteous uncle Abraham, he would have to change and become a totally different person. That, he was not prepared to do. Lot's fear was entirely justified

The Parallel to our Generation

There is a parallel that can be drawn for our own generation.

Sodom, with its lack of spirituality, is a metaphor for the state of the world in exile. And though exile conditions vary from one age to another and from one place to another, the common denominator of all aspects of exile is that they compromise our standards of attachment to G-d and His teachings. The state of Sodom is the lowest point to which exile conditions can take us. And that is one of the dangers of living in exile even in its most benign forms; once we come off the "mountain" we can fall into the abyss.

The Torah tells us that we should never get too comfortable in exile. Moreover, we must endeavor to get out of exile by pleading with and demanding of G-d to bring Moshiach, by learning Torah, specifically the aspects of Torah that concern the age of Redemption. This knowledge will help us shape and mold a liberated way of thinking and act in a totally G-dly and selfless manner – a foretaste of the way we will live in the Messianic Age.

However, exile forces counter these three efforts. And as much as we believe that Moshiach's coming is inevitable, we can still emulate Lot's three twists

alluded to in the word *vayismahmah*—and he tarried.

First, we feel comfortable in exile. We enjoy the prosperity and even the spiritual opportunities that we have, particularly in this country. We are loathe to give it up so quickly, so we are prepared to take our time.

Second, we don't like change. We imagine that the changes of the future will be drastic; totally unfamiliar to us. And even if they are for the good, it is still change. And the prospect of change for many is daunting.

Third, when we live in exile we may look good only as compared to others. In the Messianic Age, we will be living amongst the resurrected righteous people of the past and we fear that we will look like nobodies. Moreover, we often use exile conditions as an excuse for our wanting behavior. Because exile conditions eclipse our ability to excel, even if we barely deserve a passing grade, we are doing well. We might be concerned that in the future we will no longer have the same excuses and we will have to perform on a much higher level. Just as Lot was terrified of going up to the mountain, so too we are fearful of climbing the spiritual mountain associated with the future Redemption.

I Believe, With Perfect Faith, I Await

There is one other place where the word *yismahmeah* is employed. In the Biblical book of Chabakuk, the prophet states: If he shall tarry, wait for him." This verse has been incorporated in the Thirteen Principles of Faith many recite daily, based on Maimonides formulation of the basic principles of Judaism, which declares:

> "I believe, with perfect faith in the coming of Moshiach. And even if he tarries, I await his coming every day."

The prophet's reference to tarrying is not just about Moshiach's tarrying but also about our reaction to his coming. We tarry and hesitate when it comes to getting out of our Sodom/exile to climb the mountain. We want a place of respite before the Redemption.

And to counter all three reasons for this tarrying, there are three expressions of faith in the Ani Maamin prayer:

(a) "I believe" (b) "with perfect faith" (c) "I await his coming every day."

To counter the attitude of: "I like it here in exile," we declare "I believe in the coming of Moshiach." We believe that our place is not in exile because in exile we are not truly ourselves. Thus, the emphasis

on the word "I". The true "I" believes in and identifies with Moshiach.

To respond to the fear of change, we say "with perfect faith", to indicate that we are not fearful of this change, and that we want it with all of our heart and soul. The reason why it is a sincere faith is that, in truth, the changes will not destroy who we are now. It will merely enhance all that we are and possess. It is not change; it is real growth.

And to dismiss the fear of the future challenges we assert: "I await his coming every day." This expresses our intense desire and eager anticipation for Moshiach and the future Redemption. We do not ask for Redemption reluctantly, rather, we are enthusiastic about it because we believe that we will be able to meet the new challenges.

ESSAY FIFTEEN

MINE IS MINE AND YOURS IS YOURS—THIS IS THE WAY OF SODOM

Giving with the wrong intention is still a Mitzvah.

However, even a Mitzvah can be tainted with Sodomite insensitivity.

Our challenge is to remove the smallest residue of Sodomite blindness from our Mitzvos.

ESSAY FIFTEEN

MINE IS MINE AND YOURS IS YOURS—THIS IS THE WAY OF SODOM

Sodom: Symbol of Inhumanity

One of the most corrupt societies in history, and arguably, the most corrupt, was the city of Sodom. Sodomite people were known for their loose morals and their maniacally cruel disposition towards others, particularly strangers. For this reason, G-d had decided to destroy Sodom and its neighboring towns.

Sodom has thus been used by the Torah and our Sages as the symbol of man's inhumanity and insensitivity to his fellow man.

One the most familiar references to the attitudes of Sodom can be found in the Talmudic classic Pirkei Avos, often referred to as "Ethics of the Fathers." In chapter five our Sages cites a view that one who says,

> "What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours" has exhibited a "characteristic of Sodom."

We should ponder the meaning of this statement. Why is one who respects the integrity of another's property lumped together with the most depraved people of Sodom?

One simple interpretation is that those who say "what is mine is mine" suggest that they would not part with their own property to help another. A person who thinks that his money and property are all his own will never reach out to help another with his resources.

If this is true then we might wonder why such a uncharitable person, whose behavior is reminiscent of the wicked Sodomites, would even be mentioned in Ethics of the Fathers, a treatise that was written for the person who aspires to be a *chasid*, defined as one who follows the law and wishes to go beyond the letter of the law.

Saying and doing

The answer to this question can be found in the introduction to this statement. "One who says What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours..." The Rebbe observed that it does not say, "One who acts" but "one who says." This, the Rebbe concludes, refers to a person who may have made this

statement, but certainly does not act in accordance with it.

Occasionally we find people who act charitably, but may harbor less than ideal traits. One may actually contribute to Tzedakah and reach out with his resources to others, but nevertheless may be harboring Sodomite sentiments.

By saying "What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours," the person is in effect declaring: "I will give the poor person, and I want him to realize that I have just given him from that which is exclusively my own." This "charitable" individual is actually attempting to extol the virtue of his brand of giving. "I am such a charitable person," he is saying in effect, "I will even give my own possessions to another."

Ethics of the Fathers teaches us how to not even entertain Sodomite ideas, even if one acts contrarily. Though one's charitable actions are noble, one's mindset may be closer to the Sodomite mindset.

True Ideal of Giving

The true ideal of giving is to combine the act with the thought that, in truth, nobody gives their own resources to another when they give Tzedakah. Rather, G-d has entrusted the giver of Tzedakah

with money that rightfully should have been given directly to the needy person. G-d, however, decided to "entrust" this money with the giver in order to provide him with an opportunity to be His agent in sustaining the world.

Thus, our attitude — not only our actions — should reflect the belief that even "mine is yours." Even what G-d has given me, is truly the possession of the recipient of my kindness. It originally belonged to G-d and will ultimately belong to the recipient. We are only the "middle men through whom the transfer is executed. To think otherwise is to think in the mode of the Sodomite people who could not countenance giving because they believed that G-d wanted them to keep it for themselves.

Moshiach in Sodom?

Our Sages describe the whereabouts of Moshiach as being in the wicked city of Sodom. Their intent was to describe Moshiach's role as one who will remove the Sodomite attitudes that might have tainted some of our good deeds.

While "the deed is the essential thing," Moshiach demands more of us; that we see things through the prism of Abraham and not the prism of Sodom; to see things from the perspective of the recipients of

our charity and not from our own self-centered vantage point.

Washing our Fingertips

One of the rituals associated with the end of our meals is to wash our fingertips before reciting the *Birkat Hamazon*, the Grace after Meals. Originally, this was instituted to wash off any trace of the potent Sodomite salt that might cause blindness if we touched our eyes with the residual salt on our fingertips. On a symbolic level we might add, that as we come to the end of our "meal," the repast of exile, we must remove even the slightest trace of Sodom. It does not suffice to act Jewishly but think in Sodomite fashion. We must also think Jewishly. Let us not allow the residual Sodomite ideas blind us, by preventing us to see the needs of others because we are so full of ourselves.

By removing the last trace of Sodom, we will be ready to recite the ultimate *Birkat Hamzon*, a prayer of thanksgiving to G-d for the ultimate salvation of the world with the imminent coming of Moshiach.

ESSAY SIXTEEN

LAUGHING OUR WAY TO REDEMPTION

There are three ways we can view G-d's role in our lives.

The first is to see His role in nature.

The second is to see his role in inspiring us with His wisdom.

The third is to see His supernatural role.

ESSAY SIXTEEN

LAUGHING OUR WAY TO REDEMPTION

Sarah's Laughter

One of the enigmas of the Torah is the way in which Sarah received the news that she was going to be a mother at the age of 90. In this week's parsha, the Torah states, "And Sarah laughed at her insides, saying, 'After I have withered shall I again have clear skin? And my husband is old!'"

The Torah then recounts how G-d expressed his displeasure with Sarah's laughter to Abraham,

> "Why is it that Sarah laughed saying, 'Is it even true that I shall give birth, though I have aged?' Is anything beyond G-d?! At this appointed time I will return to you at this time next year, there will be life, and Sarah will have a son."

As it appears, from even a cursory examination of the text, Sarah was expressing doubts and even

mocking her ability to bear a child. The question has been raised, how could a woman as righteous as Sarah express such misgivings?

Moreover, Rashi informs us that Sarah was even greater than Abraham when it came to prophecy. A prophet is one whose head is in the heavens but his feet are on the ground. In other words, a prophet is more in touch with the Divine and its message for us on earth. How then could Sarah so miss or ignore G-d's message to her that she would have a child.

Sarah's Defense and its Refutation

While a simple defense of her laughter could be that she did not hear this news the fact that she heard the news prophetically and directly from G-d as did Abraham. Indeed, she overhears a pagan looking wayfarer mention this to Abraham. Why then should she be faulted for doubting the blessing of a pagan?

This, however, does not seem to be a valid defense for Sarah. Her superior intuition (another form of prophecy) should have told her that there is something to that message. The mere fact that these strange, unexpected guests "landed" in their home, in the scorching heat when no human could possibly venture outside, should have alerted her to take

their words seriously; that they were G-d's conduit to deliver a Divine message.

Moreover, this occurred, as Rashi states, just three days after Abraham circumcised himself and entered into an eternal, covenant. Shouldn't that have alerted her to the reality that G-d was using them to convey a special message. Sarah, of all people, should have seen through the veil and recognized that their blessing truly emanated from G-d.

Now, we are back to square one. Considering her heightened level of spiritual perception, Sarah could now be justifiably faulted for her lack of seeing through the veil. The question thus arises anew, why did she laugh and express doubt?

Another question: When G-d reprimands her and states: "Is anything beyond G-d?" Rashi comments on the term for "beyond-*hayipalei*" and translates it three ways:

> "Is there anything *mufla*-wondrous, *muvdal*-separated and *mechusah*-covered?"

Why the three translations? And why didn't it just state "is it impossible for G-d?"

When discussing truly righteous people we have to be cautious not to impute our own sense of weakness and shortcoming to them. Their "flaws" are on a completely different plane. This is especially

true with regard to the Patriarchs, and arguably, even more so with respect to the Matriarchs, who were in total sync with G-d.

Never Doubted

Keeping this introduction in mind, one may suggest that Sarah never doubted G-d's ability to grant her a child at the age of 90. On the contrary, Sarah sought to magnify the miracle and extol its extraordinary and unparalleled nature to cause her greater excitement to combat a nefarious syndrome that seeks to desensitize us to G-d's miracles.

To explain:

One of the tactics of the insidious force of Amalek (the nation that attacked the Jews upon their departure from Egypt and a symbol of an internal evil force that seeks to destroy whatever warmth we experience for matters of holiness) is to diminish our excitement when we witness a miracle. To the more sophisticated souls Amalek's reaction to the miracle is this: "Don't get excited about the miracle. After all, G-d could do anything; what's the big deal?!"

Sarah knew that the likelihood is that if this miracle will occur there will be all sorts of cynics who will attempt to minimize the ardor and enthusiasm.

Sarah therefore sought to accentuate the sheer impossibility of her becoming a mother. She was way beyond the age of child-bearing, and according to our Sages, she never even possessed a womb. In addition, Abraham too was old and beyond the natural age of siring a child.

The more she engaged in this reflection of the sheer impossibility of her having a child, the more impressive the miracle would be not only to the cynics but also to herself. By focusing on the impossibility of this miracle she sought to enhance her own excitement and utter amazement over the miracle of having a child.

There is a story told of the famous 19th century Sage, Rabbi Moshe Sofer (known for his classic work Chasam Sofer), who made a loan to a business man who was on the brink of bankruptcy. When the man returned from a successful business trip enabled by the loan he returned the money he had borrowed and also brought the rabbi a beautiful watch as a gift and token of his appreciation. In front of his students the rabbi took the watch and expressed his admiration for its beauty and effusive praise for this exquisite piece of jewelry. After he concluded to do so he returned it to the astonished businessman saying that he was forbidden to take the watch since

it would constitute interest which a Jew is forbidden to give or take.

Now it was the turn of the students to be puzzled. If he was forbidden to take it why did he show such admiration for it and relished holding and caressing it when he had no intention of keeping it?

The Chasam Sofer explained that not charging interest on a loan was a great Mitzvah that he would rarely have an opportunity to fulfill. He therefore wanted to magnify the value and beauty of this piece of jewelry to enhance the joy of the Mitzvah.

Here too, we may posit, Sarah's incredulity was not doubt, G-d forbid. On the contrary, it was her way of increasing the degree of wonderment at this miracle, demonstrating that it had absolutely no natural basis. At face value this was an admirable gesture.

It's Beneath Sarah

Why then was G-d upset with her?

The answer may be that Sarah was expected to be at an even higher level where the most incredible miracles should not elicit amazement. Sarah was at the level where she was in touch with G-d's transcendent order. She should have become excited

and filled with joy without having to reflect on all the reasons why it was an incredible miracle. Sarah's closeness to G-d and sensitivity to His transcendence should have made this miracle seem normal. In other words, she should have been excited by her close proximity to G-d and not to the extraordinary miracle.

Thus G-d tells Abraham, "Is anything wondrous, separated and covered from G-d." Is there anything that G-d would consider unusual, why then should Sarah think it was wondrous?

The reason Rashi takes the one word used here "*hayipalei*" and renders it with the three aforementioned translations: "wondrous, separated and covered," is because G-d manifests Himself in three ways, as will be explained:

The Three Dimensions of the Aleph

The Rebbe would frequently refer to the teaching of the Alter Rebbe that the difference between Golah-exile and Geulah-Redemption is the sole letter Aleph. This letter has three meanings: On the lowest level is means Master, referring to G-d's role as the Force behind everything that exists. In the days of exile, G-d's presence within creation is hidden; with the advent of Geulah it will be revealed.

The second level represented by the Aleph is the dimension of G-d as the Teacher of the world; the One whose knowledge is presently separated from us. G-d's wisdom is unfathomable and in the Messianic Age even that dimension of G-d will become accessible.

The third level rearranges the letters of the word Aleph to read *peleh,* which means wonder. While G-d's intellect is elusive and separated from us it is still in some way connected to the world. In the Messianic Age we will be exposed to the most inscrutable aspects of the Divine which even transcend His hidden wisdom.

This, then, might be the underlying meaning of G-d's rebuke to Sarah. "Sarah, you are on such a high level; you are in touch with the concealed dimension of G-d." Sarah, like Abraham, would go around and reveal to people that there is a Creator and Master of this universe. For you G-d is not covered.

Moreover, G-d intimates to Sarah, "You have even penetrated into the hidden knowledge behind creation. Sarah, like Abraham, was exposed to esoteric knowledge. Abraham, our tradition informs us, was the author of the Kabbalistic work, *Sefer Yetzirah,* which contains Divine wisdom.

G-d then goes beyond that, alluding to Sarah's connection to the most wondrous and esoteric

dimension of G-d. On that level there is no more incredulity than there is about the most natural phenomena. Sarah should not have to have "psyched" herself into excitement about this miracle.

Sarah's Humility not Cynicism

When Sarah denied that she laughed she was sincere because her laughter was not, G-d forbid, cynicism. Sarah, in her humility, could not imagine that she was at the level where laughing to enhance excitement for the miracle was considered a flaw. G-d, who knew her true value, felt that it was out of place.

As we stand on the threshold of the Final Redemption through Moshiach, we will soon be exposed to, and elevated through, the three levels of the Aleph. We will uncover the Divine within creation; fathom elusive Divine wisdom and experience G-d's utter transcendent wonders. At that time we will all laugh, but not with incredulity, but with unmitigated joy at having realized the level where we no longer have to be amazed about G-d and His miracles because we will be one with Him.

ESSAY SEVENTEEN

SEALING OFF THE TWO OPEN SIDES OF THE ALLEY

There are three sources of influence in our lives:

Internal, Mentor and Community.

Our generation is fortunate to have the best of all three.

ESSAY SEVENTEEN

SEALING OFF THE TWO OPEN SIDES OF THE ALLEY

Avimelech's Repetitive Excuses

Abraham had to deal with all sorts of people who challenged his faith and loyalty to G-d. At the end of this week's parsha, the Torah recounts his dealings with the Philistine king Avimelech. It recounts how Avimelech's Philistines servants seized Abraham's wells. Abraham rebuked Avimelech, who gave an ambiguous defense:

> "I do not know who did this thing; furthermore you have not told me, and moreover I myself have heard nothing of it except for today."

This repetitious response requires an explanation. Why couldn't he just have said: "I don't know who did this thing." Isn't it obvious that if he didn't know of the theft of the wells, then he hadn't heard it from Abraham or from anyone else? Besides, why waste so much space in the Torah telling us of

Avimelech's response? Every word of Torah carries within it a message for us.

Abraham and Avimelech: Parallel and Opposite Personalities

It is important for us to focus on the relationship between Abraham and Avimelech the Philistine leader to answer these questions.

In Chassidic literature the Philistines and Avimelech represent the same trait of Abraham; however, they do so in opposite directions.

Abraham was the epitome of kindness. He was suffused with love for G-d and people. Abraham was an extrovert. He was an open person, wearing his emotions on his sleeve. People reciprocated that love of others and he was therefore successful in attracting thousands of them to monotheism and his kind and just ways.

The Philistines also possessed a zest for life; they were open and gregarious. Their lives were filled with joy and love too. Indeed, the very word in Hebrew for the Philistines "*Plishtim*" is cognate to the word *mefulash,* used in the Mishnah in the phrase *mavoy mefulash,* which describes an alley which opens to public thoroughfares at both ends. In emotional terms this phrase connotes a person

who has little or no emotional restraint. Everything is out in the open for everyone to see.

The salient difference between these two models is that Abraham's openness and love were always directed toward the right ends. There were barriers and red lines that he would not cross. The Philistines, however, lacked boundaries. Their joy was baseless, meaningless, carefree and cynical. The Philistines are described in the Torah as mockers who ridiculed and scorned everyone and everything else. They stood for nothing.

The analogy to an alley open to public thoroughfares on both sides suggests that the Plishtim model allowed every influence to enter into their lives, regardless of the direction from which it hailed. Moreover, the root of the word Plishtim—*palash*—denotes an invasion or infiltration of alien forces into one's land. And, indeed, historically, the Philistines of the Biblical period constantly made incursions into the Land of Israel.

In the spiritual parallel, a person afflicted with the Philistine mentality is open to influences coming from every direction, and is also comfortable to invade and trespass others' territory. A person who has no personal borders and boundaries will not respect the borders and boundaries of others.

Selfless and Selfish

The underlying difference between the model of Abraham and the model of Avimelech is that Abraham's love, joy and openness were selfless. Abraham was the epitome of humility. He stated, "I am but dust and ashes." His entire life revolved around what he could do for G-d and others around him. The Philistine model of openness, by contrast, is a product of selfish indulgence and an inflated ego.

So while Abraham and Avimelech had something, which appeared to be, in common, in terms of their temperaments, they were worlds apart. Abraham reached out to people but did not invade them. Contrast that with Avimelech when he took Sarah for himself. Abraham was filled with the joie de vivre, he was neither mocker nor cynic. Abraham respected the natural boundaries between people even as he influenced and entered into their lives.

The theft of Abraham's well by Avimelech's servants fits exactly into the Philistine model and mindset of lack of respect for borders.

When Abraham challenged Avimelech and asked why his servants had appropriated Abraham's wells, Avimelech's three part answer can be understood as based on three reasons for a person's moral

deficiency: the three sources of awareness of right and wrong.

Spiritual Dialysis

Avimelech first stated:

> "I do not know who did this thing."

One of the ways we know what is right and what is wrong is through knowledge. Knowledge does not mean book knowledge in this context, but an intuitive awareness of right and wrong. The Talmud tells us that if, G-d forbid, the Torah had not been given we still would have learned morals from animals. There are certain behaviors which are natural and that a "normal" person could anticipate.

Indeed, the Midrash tells us that Abraham knew and practiced the entire Torah even though it had not been presented formally to the world. The Midrash states that he knew the Torah from "his kidneys." This means that he derived his information, intuitively, from within himself. He possessed an internal filter to separate truth from falsehood, goodness from evil, etc.

Avimelech's first response told Abraham that did not have the same kind of internal compass. His kidneys malfunctioned and he was in need of spiritual dialysis.

Rebbe

Avimelech then presents his second rejoinder to Abraham for his lack of sensitivity to the theft of Abraham's well:

"Furthermore you have not told me."

Now that we have received the Torah we no longer have to intuit what G-d wants of us. We no longer have to rely on our conscience to determine what behavior is moral. G-d, in his infinite kindness, gave us the Torah. It will guide us in every step of the way. And this Torah is highly accessible, as the Torah itself states: "It is not in heaven... or overseas." The Torah was entrusted to each and every Jew, and we have an unbroken chain of Torah transmitters who made the words of the Torah accessible and meaningful to us.

Avimelech, however, lamented that he did not have a teacher of Torah. Avimelech's arrogance and ego did not let him ask to be mentored by Abraham. Avimelech had no Rebbe.

Community

There is however a third source of ethical awareness. Even when we have no spiritual intuition and we have not been given a good moral education we can pick up moral values by osmosis. Jews have

always lived in communities, where they absorbed morality just by breathing the air. Alas, Avimelech did not have that luxury. He lived in a depraved environment, leading to his third line of defense:

> "And moreover I myself have heard nothing of it except for today."

By "hearing" he meant picking things up by having his ears open to their vibes.

Philistine Threat at the Exodus and Today

In the aftermath of the Exodus of the Jewish nation from Egypt, G-d deliberately had them circle around Philistine territory. He was concerned that His fledgling nation would be harmed by the cynical approach of the Philistines. He wished to shelter them during their attempt to develop an independent identity. A sneering comment can derail a neophyte's attempt to shed his previously constrained life. For His slave nation to develop an internally liberated mentality, they could do without the invasive, damaging, influence of the Philistines.

Now that we are at the crossroads of the Final Redemption, which the prophet stated is analogous to the Redemption from Egypt, we too must be mindful of the threat of the Philistine mindset. We are living in the "Facebook Age," an age of excessive

openness; there are no secrets and no boundaries. We face the unprecedented danger of the invasive influences of the mockers and cynics among others.

The Difference

There is one significant difference, though, between the nascent Jewish nation at the time of the Exodus and our threshold-of-Redemption generation.

At the time of the Exodus, they could not summon their inner moral strength due to the impact slavery had on them. According to our tradition, they had degenerated to the nadir of depravity. Gaining access to their core of holiness and internal moral compass would have been like having to drill through miles of hard impenetrable rock.

In addition, they had not yet arrived at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. They could not rely on that revelation for guidance. And, finally, learning and absorbing by osmosis was also not a viable alternative for them. After all, they were all in the same boat—recently freed slaves with a slave mentality, who grew up in Egypt, the world's most depraved society.

Our generation, in stark contrast, is different on all three counts: We have access to our inner core of holiness. The Rebbe informed us that the miracles

we have witnessed during the Six Day War and beyond served as the Great Shofar, awakening the Jewish nation and precipitating a spiritual revolution that has inspired hundreds of thousands of Jews to return to their roots.

We also have the luxury of having the greatest teachers and leaders. Our Rebbe has given us hundreds of volumes of profound, inspirational and relevant Torah teachings, thousands of hours of talks, tens of thousands of pastoral letters, etc., and who has dispatched thousands of emissaries to educate the Jewish world, reaching every nook and cranny of the world.

Furthermore, we are fortunate that we have communities of Jews numbering in hundreds of thousands, all committed to Judaism. We also have unprecedented access to so much Torah knowledge thanks to modern media. For all the nonsense and harmful influences in our society today, there are abundant positive and holy influences for us to absorb by osmosis.

Our generation can thus repeat Avimelech's refrain in a "slightly" modified and edited version:

> "I do ~~not~~ know who did this thing; furthermore you have ~~not~~ told me, and moreover I myself have heard ~~nothing of~~ it ~~except for~~ today."

We are indeed ready and eager for the Messianic Age, when those three avenues of knowledge will be expanded to their maximum capacity.

ESSAY EIGHTEEN

30 AND 36 TZADIKIM TO BRING MOSHIACH

Not all Tzadikkim are created equal.

Some focus on the royal aspects of life in anticipation of the future Messianic Age.

Others empower us to fight the darkness of exile.

The ideal tzadik is to combine both approaches.

ESSAY EIGHTEEN

30 AND 36 TZADIKIM TO BRING MOSHIACH

30 Like Abraham

Before dispatching His angels to destroy the decadent city of Sodom, G-d reveals His plan to Abraham.

G-d's rationale for divulging His plan to Abraham is summed up in this week's parsha:

> "G-d said, how can I conceal from Abraham what I am doing. Abraham will become a great and powerful nation, and all of the nations will be blessed through him. For I have known him because he instructs his sons and his household after him to keep the way of G-d, acting with charity and justice in order that G-d will bring upon Abraham everything he had said about him."

Commenting on this verse, the Jerusalem Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 2:1) states:

> "The world cannot have fewer than 30 *tzadikim*-righteous people like our father Abraham."

To support this assertion the Jerusalem Talmud cites the foregoing verse: "Abraham will become…" The Hebrew word for "become" "*yihyeh*" has the numerical value of 30. Hence, the Jerusalem Talmud reinterprets the words as "Abraham will become" as Abraham will be the progenitor of 30 people like him.

The Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Sukkah 45b) seems to have a divergent view concerning the number of righteous people that are needed for the world to exist:

> "There are no less than 36 righteous people in the world who receive the countenance of the Divine presence each day."

The Talmud finds support for this number in the verse (Isaiah 30:18): "Praiseworthy are all those who wait for Him." The Hebrew word for "him" – "lo" has the numerical value of 36.

We must try to understand and reconcile the divergent views of the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds concerning the number of righteous people in whose merit the world stands. And how do the

numbers 30 and 36 relate to the verses that are cited to support each view?

The Number of Royalty

To understand the significance of the numbers 30 and 36, we must preface our discussion with the statement in the Ethics of the Fathers (Avos 6: 6) that royalty is associated with the number 30. The first Jewish king, Joseph, assumed the mantle of leadership in Egypt at the age of 30. The value of the letters that spell Yehudah, who was the king of the other tribes, numerically add up to 30. Likewise, King David was 30 when he assumed the leadership of the Jewish nation.

The number 30 in Hebrew is depicted by the letter Lamed. Lamed is also the "tallest" letter in the Hebrew alphabet and is the central letter of the word king in Hebrew: *Melech*.

What is the connection between 30 and royalty?

The word Melech is an acronym for the three dominant vital organs of the body: *Mo'ach*-brain, *lev*-heart and *ka'ved*-liver. The brain is obviously the king of the entire body.

The brain itself is divided into three parts that parallel the three intellectual faculties of: *chochma*-conceptual wisdom, *binah*-analytical wisdom, and *da'as*-attachment to the subject. These form the head of the entire structure of ten faculties that constitute the spiritual genome of the human being.

Kabbalah also teaches us that each of the intellectual faculties is comprised of ten elements: Chochma consists of ten faculties that are subsumed within it; the same is true of binah and da'as. Together, they combine the 30 intellectual faculties which exercise leadership of one's life.

We can thus see, by analogy, that the emphasis on 30 righteous people pertains to the role of the righteous as leaders of their respective generations.

The Source of Royalty

Abraham, among his many roles, was also a king. Rashi cites a Midrashic interpretation of the place called Emek Hamelech-the Valley of the King, mentioned in last week's parsha: "A valley where all the nations agreed to make Abram their king..." Similarly, in next week's parsha, the Hittites declare to Abraham: "You are a prince of G-d in our midst."

Abraham displayed the power of royalty first by gaining full mastery over every organ of his body, particularly after he circumcised himself.

We can now understand why the Jerusalem Talmud speaks of the number 30—the number associated with royalty—in connection with Abraham. Abraham was a king and it was this power of royalty that he bequeathed to his children.

This is particularly true of those whose lives are governed by Torah study, as the Talmud states: "Who are the kings? The Sages." Furthermore, this power of royalty, possessed by every Jew as an inheritance from Abraham to Jews who follow in his footsteps, earns us profound respect and admiration from the nations of the world.

This then is what G-d meant when He stated that He must tell Abraham about His plans for the destruction of Sodom. As a king who has mastery over himself and by extension his followers and his environment, Abraham cannot be oblivious to what happens in his own backyard.

This is the duty of all Jewish leaders. They cannot be oblivious and indifferent to the things that happen within the Jewish community. As we get closer to the ultimate period of royalty, the Messianic Age, the leader must also promote justice and

righteousness that they may flourish among the other nations of the world.

We have seen this expansion of Jewish leadership in the Rebbe, whose concern for every Jew is legendary. Moreover, the Rebbe launched a major initiative to promote the Seven Noahide Commandments amongst all of humanity. He connected this effort to our proximity to the Messianic Age, when the power of royalty will reach its pinnacle and humanity will recognize the oneness of G-d and serve Him accordingly.

The seed for this development was sown by Abraham, who bequeathed this power of royalty to each and every Jew, but especially to the 30 special righteous people of every generation. More specifically, this power is vested in the souls of the greatest Jewish leaders, who embodied the 30 traits associated with royalty, and whose impact has brought and continues to bring the world so much closer to its final recognition of the sovereignty of G-d.

Royalty and the Jerusalem Talmud

The Jerusalem Talmud is known as the Talmud of Light for its unique ability to see the future in the

present. The Jerusalem Talmud thus sees royalty at every step of our journey to Redemption.

Indeed, the Midrash Rabbah (Bereishis 47:2, which Rashi asserts was composed in the Land of Israel, and is similar in approach to the Jerusalem Talmud), finds royalty in every nook and cranny of the Land, even in Sodom! Commenting on the verse in Psalms "I have found My servant David," the Midrash asks, "Where was he found?" and answers: "In Sodom."

Commentators explain that Sodom was where Lot resided; Lot, for whom Abraham battled against four mighty kings. Lot was the ancestor of Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David, and thus the progenitor of Jewish royalty until Moshiach. Abraham, according to this Midrash, was obsessed with sowing, nurturing and protecting the seeds of royalty.

We can now gain an even deeper insight into the reason G-d wanted Abraham to know what He planned for Sodom and how it is connected with the 30 righteous people the world needs in every generation. As discussed above, these 30 righteous people are the heirs to Abraham's royal status. It was therefore crucial for Abraham to save Lot, Sodom's most illustrious citizen to ensure that the royal line of David, leading to Moshiach, will survive.

It is the Jerusalem Talmud's premise that we must search for the royalty of the future now.

Babylonian Talmud's Approach

The Babylonian Talmud, which is associated with the darkness of exile, sees things the way they are now, through the prism of a Jew who is in exile but seeks to get out of it.

The Babylonian Talmud's style is dialectic. The Talmud gropes through the darkness to ultimately discover the answer to difficult questions. In contrast to the Jerusalem Talmud, which finds the answers directly, the Babylonian Talmud struggles with myriads of questions and arguments. The struggle to find answers is seen by the Kabbalists as a spiritual force that helps to refine the person who studies it and by extension, the world around him. This force helps us dispel the darkness of exile.

We can now understand why the Babylonian Talmud speaks of 36 righteous people. The number 36 is descriptive of the six primary emotional traits, each consisting of six elements. The three intellectual traits and the seventh emotional one—*Malchus*-royalty—are absent in this count. The focus of these 36 righteous people is the emotional upheaval of exile. They are not charged with

leadership per se but rather with expressing compassion, empathy, warmth and support and instilling hope for all Jews suffering in exile. This is much like the Ba'al Shem Tov, who led a clandestine organization of hidden tzadikkim—many who were reputed to be members of this elite club of 36—to help the downtrodden Jews of that period.

Thus the Babylonian Talmud finds support for the 36 righteous people in the verse, "Praiseworthy are all those who wait for Him," which speaks of the need to wait and hope. This is also the role of all those who wish to emulate them: to express hope and faith in the ultimate Redemption. These 36 righteous individuals and their disciples recognize exile for what it is, a period of darkness, and plead with G-d to end this nightmare.

Combining Both Approaches

We are now living in a time when it is imperative that we follow both approaches. From the Ba'al Shem Tov onward, we see how the great Jewish leaders have integrated the approaches of the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds. On the one hand, we must see the darkness for what it is. We must empathize with those who are less fortunate, comfort them and declare *ad masai*-how much longer! We must be conscious of our situation and

constantly look for ways to get out of this quagmire known as Galus.

On the other hand, we must also see the light that penetrates the darkness. We must open our eyes to the light of Redemption and the miracles associated with it. We must see the revelation of the teachings of Chassidus as the light of Geulah that illuminate our lives in the present. We must recognize the light that emanates from all of the great Chassidic masters, from the Ba'al Shem Tov through our Rebbe, who are all Messianic figures whose holiness pierces through the darkness and gives us a taste of the future.

ESSAY NINETEEN

WALKING TOGETHER

Retirement is an invention of Western Civilization.

Its underlying ethos is in direct opposition to the values of Judaism.

no matter how great our early achievements, the Torah, Health permitting, wants us to "keep on trucking."

ESSAY NINETEEN

WALKING TOGETHER

Most Powerful Story

The Akeidah, the story of the binding of Isaac, is clearly one of the most powerful and enigmatic stories we read in the Torah. Much has been written to describe the degree of Abraham's readiness to go to extremes in following G-d's will.

Many have also grappled with the issue of how Abraham, the man who is characterized by our tradition as the most kind human being to have lived on this planet, could have been prepared to carry put the sacrifice of his own beloved son.

The Effect on Abraham

In this essay we will focus on the way Abraham's incredible achievement affected him and how it can be applied to our own generation.

In the beginning of the narrative of the Akeidah, when Abraham walked with Isaac—before the latter

knew that he was to be the sacrifice—the Torah writes: "And the two walked together."

Their walking together, Rashi informs us, was meant to convey that,

> "Abraham who knew that he was going to slaughter his son walked with the same degree of desire and joy as Isaac who did not sense what was about to happen."

A few verses later, the Torah tells us—according to Rashi's translation—that Abraham revealed to his son Isaac that he was going to be in place of the lamb. Yet, the Torah testifies once more that "the two walked together," suggesting that Isaac went wholeheartedly with Abraham, despite the fact that he knew that he was to be slaughtered.

It is evident from these two interpretations that our Sages understood the phrase "and the two walked together," as an indication that they were emotionally on the same page.

On the Same Page

Based on this premise, a question arises: When Abraham returns from the site of the Akeidah with his youths—who were oblivious to the entire ordeal of the Akeidah—the Torah also employs a similar expression:

> "And Abraham returned to his youths, and they arose and they walked together..."

What message does the Torah want to convey to us when it lumps Abraham and his youths together? It certainly does not just mean that they physically rode together. But how could it mean that they were together emotionally? How could we suggest that Abraham, who had just performed the ultimate act of sacrifice, and passed the greatest test in history with flying colors, experienced the same lack of emotion as his youths, who were far away from the entire episode?

R. Yisroel of Ruzhin, the great Chassidic master, explains this "walking together" of Abraham and his youths in a rather novel way.

Many, if not most people, upon meeting a challenge, feel a sense of accomplishment that gives them a certain feeling of superiority. Occasionally this can make them arrogant and cause them to act condescendingly to others. The greater the challenge contrasted with the insignificant nature of the other individual, can make the gulf between them even wider.

Abraham was returning from the Akeidah, history's greatest achievement. And yet, he felt not a trace of superiority over the simple youths with whom he

was walking, who indeed, did not even have the slightest inkling of what had just transpired.

This was one powerful features of Abraham's greatness. To reach so high and yet not feel that he was better than another.

No Retirement

We may add that the word "youths" used by the Torah in this verse is instructive in yet another way.

Abraham was not a young man. And now that he had passed the test of the Akeidah—the tenth and last test G-d administered to him, according to our Sages—Abraham was entitled to feel his age and retire.

Instead, the Torah tells us that "Abraham returned to his youths," after such an illustrious career he did not rest on his laurels, but returned to his youthful endeavors. He continued his life's work of bringing the light of Judaism, justice and righteousness to the world. "He arose," and did not falter or experience any "burnout." "And he went together with them." He did not even fall behind the level and pace of his youthful achievements.

Marching Forward

The Jewish people have gone through Abraham's ten tests, many tens of times. We have demonstrated incredible sacrifice, heroism and devotion to G-d and humanity. In this advanced state our journey through exile, and at the pinnacle of our achievements, some might feel a tinge of arrogance or burnout, or both.

The message of this week's *parsha* is that even, nay especially, after reaching this advanced level, we must return to our youthful state. We must humbly, but optimistically and enthusiastically, march forward to the new age of goodness and holiness that will accompany the future Redemption for which we have been waiting, for close to 2,000 years.

Now is not the time to retire from our Jewish accomplishments, but to "return to our youths, arise and walk together with them." Or, in the words of the prophet: "Return us, o G-d to You and we shall return, renew our days as of old."

ESSAY TWENTY
THE TEST AFTER THE TEST

The most important part of meeting a challenge is the follow up after meeting that challenge.

ESSAY TWENTY

THE TEST AFTER THE TEST

The Most Dramatic Story

One of the most dramatic stories in the Torah, perhaps the most, is the way G-d tested Abraham by telling him to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. This episode is known as the Akeidah-the binding of Isaac. Abraham, the most kind and loving person to have ever walked the earth set out to the Land of Moriah—the future site of the Temple—to fulfill G-d's will.

Of course, G-d never intended for him to actually sacrifice his son, but it was a test to see how far Abraham was willing to go to carry out G-d's will.

Following the riveting narrative of the Akeidah-the Binding of Isaac, the Torah continues with a rather prosaic piece of information about Abraham's family:

> "And it came to pass after these things, that it was told to Abraham saying, 'Behold, Milcah, she too, has given birth to sons from Nachor your brother…"

The Torah then proceeds to list Nachor's twelve children, eight from his wife and four from his concubine.

This story appears to have no connection to the Akeidah. Yet the Torah, by saying "After these things" makes it clear that these two narratives are related. Rashi, commenting on the words, "she too," explains that the Torah here draws a parallel between Abraham's twelve (grand) children and his brother Nachor's twelve children. This too, begs for clarification. Why is it important to know that Abraham's brother Nachor fathered the same number of children as did Abraham?

After these Words

To answer these questions we should refer back to the beginning of the narrative of the Akeidah, where the Torah introduces it with the words,

> "And it came to pass after these things/words that G-d tested Abraham..."

Commentators grapple with the words "after these things/words." To which things is the Torah referring? What things or words preceded the test G-d gave Abraham?

One novel interpretation offered by the Chassidic work Arugas Habosem translates the verse in a

rather novel and ingenious way. Instead of "After these things G-d tested Abraham," the Hebrew text lends itself to the following inverted translation: "G-d tested Abraham as to how he would be after the test." In other words, according to this novel translation, the test was not just to determine Abraham's willingness to do G-d's bidding, even to the extent of sacrificing his son, but it was extended to include his reaction to the event in its aftermath.

No Arrogance

Arugas Habosem goes on to explain that G-d wanted us to see the effect Abraham's passing the initial test with flying colors would have on him. Would his passing of the test—of being prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac—cause him to become arrogant? Would Abraham say to himself, "See how special I am? I have demonstrated unprecedented devotion to G-d. Nobody has ever been prepared to do what have done." Abraham did none of that. He did not feel superior to anyone. In fact, the closeness to G-d that he attained, especially after he had passed the initial test, made him even more humble. The closer one gets to ultimate G-dly truth makes a person more self-effacing.

Jacob, Abraham's grandson and heir, echoes this idea. After Jacob experiences G-d's kindness he exclaims:

> "I have become small because of all the kindness and truth, which You have shown Your servant.."

Because he was shown G-d's kindness and truth, Jacob became more humble.

When a lowly and arrogant person experiences good fortune or a miracle—an expression of G-d's kindness to them—it may have the opposite effect. They become more arrogant because it reinforces their self-importance, which obscures their ability to see the source of their good fortune. By contrast, when a person sees G-dly light without any barriers they realize their own insignificance and reach a state of self-abnegation.

Thus the real test that G-d gives us is the follow up test. How do we regard ourselves after passing the initial test? Do we become arrogant and condescending to others because we think we are superior to them by virtue of the test we just passed, or do we gain a more profound recognition of who we really are in relation to G-d, and how in the scheme of creation, we are here to serve G-d and humanity and not the other way around?

Needless to stress, this form of humility does not preclude feeling pride that we are G-d's chosen people. Nor does it negate feeling good about the good things we have done. It simply means that the good we have done should tame and diminish our egos and not the other way around. Being chosen means that we were chosen to serve G-d by making this world a "dwelling place for G-d," by performing the Mitzvos and uplifting others not putting them down.

"See what I have Accomplished!"

We can now understand the juxtaposition of the story of the Akeidah with the story of how Abraham's brother Nachor had twelve children. One of the children was called Reu-mah, which translates as "see what," as in "see what I have accomplished and who I am."

The Torah wishes to demonstrate the way in which comparable experiences can yield opposite results. Abraham is tested and uplifted (indeed, the word for test in this context "Nisayon" also has the connotation of being uplifted) and becomes more humble. His brother and his family, by contrast, experience G-d's kindness and want everyone to see how great they are.

The abovementioned concept of Abraham's post-test test can be understood in yet another way. We often experience unusual events in our lives that inspire and uplift us. The question is what do we do with this inspiration? What happens afterwards? How do we translate that inspiration in our daily lives?

In times of exile, there is a "disconnect" between our souls and our bodies. We develop a capacity to compartmentalize our spiritual and normative aspects of life. The compartment of inspiration will then fail to impact the compartments of thought, speech and action.

This is one of the reasons we pray and hope for the coming of Moshiach, at which time, there will be no dichotomies. The influence of the soul will flow into all facets of our being.

All the obstacles and barriers that exist that interpose between our minds and our hearts; our hearts and our actions etc., will be removed.

Redemption is not just, or even primarily, the removal of external threats to our existence and our ability to live as Jews. The essential dynamic of Redemption is the removal of all barriers, particularly the internal ones.

ESSAY TWENTY-ONE

TOTAL TRANSPARENCY

The reason we revere Moses and Moses-like individuals is not because of their greatness but because they are so self-effacing and transparent that they channel G-d's light without any filter.

ESSAY TWENTY-ONE

TOTAL TRANSPARENCY

Taking Credit for G-d's Work

When G-d sends angels to destroy the city of Sodom and save Lot, Abraham's nephew asks to be allowed to stay in a nearby city. An angel replies:

> "Hurry, flee there, for I cannot do a thing until you arrive there."

Rashi comments on the words "For I cannot do" and states:

> "This is the punishment of the angels for having said, "for we are about to destroy" and they attributed the matter to themselves. Therefore, they did not move from there until they were forced to say that the matter is not in their authority."

This raises some obvious questions. How can angels do something contrary to G-d's will and take credit for something that they were going to do as G-d's messengers?

Moreover, the very word for angel in Hebrew is Malach, which means "messenger." How can messengers, not endowed with free choice, go against the will of G-d who sent them?

Another question has been raised:

Earlier, when the angels came to Abraham, one of them told him: "I will surely return to you at this time next year, there will be life; and behold! A son to Sarah your wife." Here too the angel implied that he was the one who would return and cause her to have the child. Yet there were no repercussions for this apparent misstatement.

Rashi explains that in fact:

> The angel did not inform him that he personally would return to him. Rather, he spoke to him as the messenger of G-d. It is like, "And an angel of G-d said to her [Hagar], 'I will greatly increase [your offspring]'' yet he does not have the ability to increase [her offspring]. Rather he was speaking as a messenger of G-d. Here too, he told it to him as the messenger of G-d.

Why then were the angels that overturned Sodom punished for saying that they would destroy the city. Wasn't it obvious that they were just channeling G-

d's actions? In what way was it different from the angel who promised Sarah a child?

No Room for Error

The simple answer is that when the angel said to Hagar that he would increase her progeny, it is obvious that angels do not have that power. Similarly, when the angel told Abraham that he would return and Sarah would bear a son, it was demonstrably clear that the angel could not guarantee her a son at the age of 90. In both of these situations no one could think that they were taking credit for something only G-d could do.

However, when they said, "for we are about to destroy [Sodom]" that was indeed a distinct possibility. Even humans have the power to destroy a city, as we have seen so many times in the past. In the Torah itself we find that Shimon and Levi destroyed the city of Shechem. So, when the angels claims they will destroy Sodom, there was room to think that G-d had delegated to them independent powers, akin to that of a human being.

Is G-d in Control of Destruction?

On a somewhat deeper level we may distinguish between the messages the angel gave concerning the birth of Isaac and the destruction of Sodom.

When G-d does things that we associate with kindness and goodness, it is obvious that it comes directly from Him, as He is the essence of benevolence and goodness. So if an angel says he will do some good it is reasonable to suggest that the angel is merely channeling the words and actions of G-d.

However, with respect to destructive forces, we might reasonably think that G-d, the epitome of kindness, does not relate to destruction. One might erroneously conclude that destruction happens when G-d "withdraws" from the world and is not present there. For destruction to take place, one might think that G-d has transferred His power to other forces, not attributable to Him. Hence, when the angels said that they were going to destroy Sodom it could easily have been misconstrued that G-d gave them some degree of autonomy.

To dispel this notion, the angels were forced to say that they have no power to do anything without G-d's express involvement. There is nothing in this world that can be divorced from G-d; even the evil

in the world, the prophet Isaiah (45:7) declares, was created by G-d.

The difference between the good that we see in our world and the destruction and evil is that in the former case, its connection to the Divine is clear while in the latter it is murky. One needs to probe and reflect to see the Divine in evil and destruction.

We can now understand why the angels could be taken to task for using confusing language. To be sure, when they said they were going to destroy the city they were ascribing it only to G-d. Yet, to undo the erroneous impression that some would have that G-d cannot be found in destruction, they were "punished," i.e., they had to make a clarifying statement to the effect that they were incapable of doing it; that it was G-d's exclusive power.

Three Questions

Based on the above analysis of the angel having no autonomous role, several questions can be raised:

First, Moses declares in the second paragraph of the Shema: "I shall provide grass in your field..." Moses implies here that he was the one to place the vegetation in our fields, but it is self-understood that G-d was speaking though Moses. Our Sages also stated that when Moses spoke, "the Divine presence

spoke through his throat." This is true as to both the positive statements as it is for the harsh words of rebuke, at the end of Leviticus.

Why is it that Moses' channeling G-d for both good and destructive matters was not misleading and did not require correction? Why was Moses treated differently from the angels?

Second, how can the Passover Haggadah state that the Exodus from Egyptian bondage was led by G-d Himself and not an angel or messenger? Wasn't Moses the liberator of the Jewish people and didn't he serve as G-d's messenger?

Third, when the Jews sinned with the Golden Calf, G-d threatened to abandon them and send an angel to lead them. Moses protested this new arrangement and he "convinced" G-d, that He, exclusively, would lead them to the Promised Land. The question is, why would an angel, G-d's instrument, not be adequate to lead them? Isn't the angel simply doing something positive in the name of G-d?

Moses: No Filter

The answer to these questions lies in our recognition of the fundamental difference between the way G-d is reflected in and through the filters of

nature, including angels, and the way He is reflected through the unfiltered soul of Moses.

An angel is a celestial animal. It is a product of nature, albeit, with superior intelligence. An angel is programmed to be a Divine messenger and operate within the framework of a natural order, albeit of a spiritual nature. Therefore, when an angel represents the Divine Messenger; there is a filter that obscures, to one degree or another, the Divine source. The angel must take care to avoid the misimpression that it is the source of the message.

Moses, by contrast, had no natural barriers. His entire existence was transparent, allowing G-d's light to shine through him. So when G-d delegated to him the responsibility to take the Jews out of Egypt, Moses' words and actions were unmitigated and unadulterated G-dly messages. It could therefore be said that G-d liberated the Jewish people and not a messenger.

Angels are the Celestial Mailmen

A down-to-earth analogy, between a mailman and telephone, can be useful to illustrate the difference between an angel and Moses. A mailman's job is to deliver the message from the sender to the recipient. There is no role confusion here. The mailman is

never mistaken for the sender of the message. Like the mailman, the angel must be careful not to be mistaken for the initiator of the message. The telephone, however, is a perfect transmitter of the message; the origin and identity of the caller is clear.

In truth, the telephone is not a perfect analogy; we don't actually hear the original voice of the caller, just an electronic replication of it. When Moses spoke, our Sages state, it was the Divine presence speaking directly through him. Moses' transparency allowed G-d to communicate with us, just as He had communicated directly to us at Mount Sinai.

When Moses transmitted G-d's words, there was no ego, personality or any other obstruction that could color or filter the Divine message.

So, on Passover we state that G-d liberated us without an angel or messenger. Moses was not a messenger; he was G-d's mouthpiece!

We can now understand why Moses was unhappy with G-d's suggestion that He would send an angel lead the Jews because it meant that G-d's leadership would be filtered through and obscured by the natural state of an angel.

Moshiach's Transparency

With this we can reconcile some of the conflicting statements made about the final Redemption. Many sources ascribe the Redemption to Moshiach, while others state that it is G-d Himself who will bring the Redemption.

We are also told that Moshiach possesses the soul of Moses and that is the key for solving the apparent contradiction. Moshiach is a transparent communicator and transmitter of G-d's light and liberating powers. His refinement, holiness and self-abnegation are so complete that he experiences no "static" in the communication between G-d and himself.

Moses and Moshiach's greatness lie not in the qualities they possess but rather in what they are not. They have gained total control over their egos. That renders them totally transparent, enabling them to channel G-d's liberating power to bring the final Redemption